

**Performance, Kinship and Archives: Queering Acts of Mourning in
the Aftermath of Argentina's 1976-1983 Dictatorship**

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Abstract

In the aftermath of Argentina's last dictatorship (1976-1983), the organisations created by the relatives of the disappeared deployed the trope of a 'wounded family'. The unspoken rule was that only those related by blood to the missing were entitled to ask for justice. This thesis queers this biological tradition. Drawing from performance studies and queer theory, it develops an alternative framework for understanding the transmission of trauma beyond bloodline inscriptions. It shows how grief brought into light an idea of community that exceeds traditional family ties.

In order to demonstrate this, the thesis builds an archive of non-normative acts of mourning. This archive crosses different generations. The introduction utilises the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo's statement 'Our Children gave birth to us' as the departure for a non-biological lineage. Chapter 1 shows how the black humour that informs H.I.J.O.S., the association created by the children of the disappeared, works as a form of affective reparation in the face of loss. Chapter 2 proposes a dialogue between *Los Rubios* (Albertina Carri, 2003), *M* (Nicolás Prividera, 2007) and *La mujer sin cabeza* (Lucrecia Martel, 2008) to show how these films manage to displace the normative cult of the victim. Chapter 3 conceives the cooking sessions that take place at ESMA former detention camp as a form of conversion of this site of death. Chapter 4 explores Lola Arias' *Mi vida después* (2009) as an intergenerational artefact for the transmission of trauma on- and off-stage. Chapter 5 considers Félix Bruzzone's novella *Los topos* (2008) as the announcement of a new language of kinship. In conclusion, the thesis argues that the aftermath of violence not only produced pain but also new forms of pleasure. Ultimately, it sheds light on a new sense of 'being together' that has emerged in the wake of loss.

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Note on Style and Referencing System

This thesis follows the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) Style Guide. Except when official transcripts are provided, original quotes in Spanish of interviews, films, books and plays are included in footnotes.

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¹ Cecilia Sosa, 'Queering acts of mourning in the aftermath of Argentina's dictatorship: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and *Los Rubios* (2003)' in *The Memory of State Terrorism in the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay* ed. by Vincent Druliolle, and Francesca Lessa (New York: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 63-85.

² Sosa, 'On Mothers and *Spiders*: A Face-to-Face Encounter with Argentina's Mourning' in *Memory Studies*, 4.3 (2011) 63-72.

³ Sosa, 'A Counter-narrative of Argentine Mourning. *The Headless Woman* (2008), by Lucrecia Martel' in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26.7-8 (2009), 250-262.

⁴ 'Sosa, Lola Arias: Expanding the Real' in *No More Drama* (Dublin: Project Press, 2011), pp. 46-66.

⁵ Sosa, 'Mi vida después (2009): Non-Kin Affects in Post-Dictatorial Argentina' in *E-misférica* 7.2 'After Truth' (2011), <http://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/en/e-misferica-72/sosa> [accessed 13 December 2011]

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Introduction

In what ways are we ‘touched’ by the past? Are those who have personally experienced the effects of violence the only ones entitled to contest them? Can the rehearsal of trauma bring pleasures to the present? Can loss produce alternative affiliations for the future? In the wake of Argentina’s last dictatorship (1976-1983), the organisations created by the relatives of those missing adopted the form of what I refer to as a ‘wounded family’. The tacit cultural rule of the post-dictatorship period stipulates that only those who were directly affected by the military repression are entitled to assume the right to remember. This thesis is an attempt to challenge the politics of memory currently in play in Argentina. My project seeks to offer an alternative framework to understand the transmission of trauma beyond bloodline inscriptions.

In recent years the field of queer studies has expanded its boundaries to address concerns that are not exclusively related to sexual and identity politics. Scholars such as Judith Butler, Ann Cvetkovich, David Eng, Lee Edelman, Sara Blackman, Carolyn Dinshaw, Eve Sedgwick and Sara Ahmed, among many others, have crafted theoretical tools to engage with experiences of trauma, loss, and melancholia alongside grief and injury. The conviction that informs my project is that the insights provided by queer theory can be productive in developing an alternative method to approach the sense of bereavement left by the vanishing of thousands during Argentina’s dictatorship, famously known as the ‘disappeared’, those who were tortured and secretly murdered during the military regime.

With this in mind, I aim to explore the country’s legacy of violence through the lens of queer studies. Beyond sexual implications, I primarily use the term ‘queer’ in the sense that Butler addresses: ‘Queer is not being lesbian, queer is not being gay. It is an argument against certain normativity’.¹ In a parallel way, Eve Sedgwick notes that queer is not simply same-sex desire but the term spins ‘outward along dimensions that

¹ See Judith Butler, ‘The Desire for Philosophy’, an interview conducted by Regina Michalik, Lola Press (May 2001). http://www.lolapress.org/elec2/artenglish/butl_e.htm [accessed 2 November 2011].

can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all'.² Drawing upon these conceptions, I present my queer reading as an attempt to 'fracture' conventional discourses on memory in Argentina. In so doing, I aim to provide new vocabularies to account for the affective lines of transmission that already permeate the wider society. If during the first years of democracy the evocation of family ties was politically expedient for the relatives of the 'disappeared' to claim state recognition, I argue that the same biological framework has prevented local and international scholars from understanding the transmission of trauma on a broader scale. Therefore, in this project I aim to explore the alternative forms of social belonging that have emerged as a result of violence. In so doing, I also seek to rethink how conventional understandings of family and kinship have been rephrased in response to this experience of loss.

In an oblique way, this project also draws from my personal experience. I grew up during the dictatorship and, although there are no victims in my family, the experience of loss and violence also marked me beyond obvious sites of suffering. As with many others of my generation, many of my closest friends had missing relatives and the resonances of this experience of terror have informed my affective and political environment during successive periods of my life. First at the highly politicised *Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires*, and then as a student of Sociology at the *Universidad de Buenos Aires*, I found that traces of trauma inevitably echoed through these academic communities. The traumatic past permeated buildings, personal biographies and knowledge(s), composing their affective atmospheres across different generations. Later on, as a cultural journalist working at the national newspaper *Página 12*, I successively engaged with films, artworks, books, and performances, which gave an account of this period while proposing different responses to loss. Rather than any other formal activism, a passionate rejection of the military terror perhaps constituted my main political militancy. In those terms, I have joined the classical rounds of the *Madres* of the Plaza de Mayo encircling the central square, and many other demonstrations and campaigns organised by the expanded human rights movement in my country. Nonetheless, through all these years, as much as I felt touched and moved by the intensities of the aftermath of the dictatorship, I also felt that they did not belong to me entirely. Somehow, it seemed as though only

² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 9.

the ‘direct’ victims had the authority, the privileges and ultimately the right to talk about these issues. It was this silent and persistent mode of engaging with loss, a sort of established framework to deal with the unbearable, that finally placed me outside, making me feel like a necessary but still lateral supporting actor in the national drama. As I will go on to elaborate, the ‘wounded family’ has created hierarchies, pedigrees, forms of inclusion and exclusion, and these secret barriers were difficult to cross. Ultimately, the experience of loss has been ‘under arrest’.

It was only when I arrived in the UK in 2007, to undertake a Masters degree at Goldsmiths College, London that I thought that I could act upon those ambivalent feelings and learned to approach this experience from a novel perspective. During my current research in the Department of Drama at Queen Mary, I found not only the critical distance but also the creative tools that I needed to build this project. Over the last three years, I have successively engaged with performance studies, queer theory, and the expanding work around affect to understand how to act upon these political feelings, and ultimately express my commitment to an intensity that I could not formerly master alone. This thesis is a result of this work. Drawing upon the perspective of being not entirely a part, it addresses the role of those who felt touched and injured by violence in non-traditional ways. Ultimately, from this ‘outsider’ position, my project attempts to offer a new vocabulary to name the affective traces left by an experience of loss, which have not yet been fully articulated.

In those terms, this thesis challenges traditional conceptions of kinship. Throughout my project I introduce a series of case studies that show how the language of kinship has expanded as a result of violence. This alternative ‘feeling of kinship’ does not respond to bloodline traditions, but rather to what Eng describes in another context as the ‘collective, communal, and consensual affiliations as well as the psychic, affective, and visceral bonds’ that go beyond family settings.³ Ultimately, my thesis shows how the experience of grief has finally brought to light a new idea of community.

In this Introduction, I will first present how the process of loss has been framed as a

³ David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship. Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 2.

family issue. Then, I will show how the latest democratic governments have adopted the position of the relatives as their own political lineage. Finally, I will present a series of contested biographical cases that show how traditional accounts of the family have begun to be displaced.

The familial inscription of loss

Many scholars have called attention to familial inscription of the process of loss in Argentina. From different fields and perspectives, Diana Taylor, Elizabeth Jelin, Judith Filc, Gabriela Nouzeilles, Ana Longoni, and Brenda Werth among others, have engaged with the framing of local trauma in terms of a bloodline assembly of victims. This particular overlap between kinship ties and groups of victims characterises the human rights field in Argentina, explaining why normative discourses of memory have been mainly processed as a family issue. As Jelin argues, ‘*truth* came to be equated with testimony of those “directly affected” first and foremost in the voices of blood relatives of the “disappeared”’.⁴ In this thesis, I wish to show how the experience of loss has exceeded the limits prescribed by blood. Through the analysis of performances, films, literature and memoirs, I will map the elusive and fragile affects that surround the experience of mourning beyond the boundaries of those who have been ‘directly affected’ by violence.⁵ Far from dismissing the pain of those who experienced bereavement within their own families, my perspective aims to shed light on the emotional responses that might be tangential to those who have traditionally considered themselves to be the ‘real’ victims – the relatives of the disappeared.

My research aims at contesting the politics of victimization that have become the prevalent mode of engaging with loss. In particular, it considers how from 2003 to the present, the ‘Kirchnerist’ period embraced the flags of the victims to transform memory into a national duty. For instance, since 2006, the 24 of March, the anniversary of the military coup, has been transformed into a public holiday and national day of ‘Memory, Truth and Justice’. During the course of this thesis, I will

⁴ Elizabeth Jelin, ‘Victims, Relatives, and Citizens in Argentina: Whose Voice is Legitimate Enough?’, in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. by Richard A. Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 175-201 (p.177). Jelin’s emphasis.

⁵ Jelin, ‘Victims, Relatives, and Citizens in Argentina’, p.182.

try to demonstrate how this seemingly ‘progressive’ human rights politics also advocates a bloodline hierarchy of suffering at a more surreptitious level. Against the official discourse, I am interested in examining how locally situated responses to loss and trauma can build alternative forms of intimacy. In particular, my thesis shows how different generations of Argentines have been connected, mobilised and entangled in the face of loss, and how they connect with disparate sites of memory – namely, a memory park facing the river, the cooking sessions at a former detention camp, and also a theatrical stage where a team of actors re-enacts the past by wearing their parents’ clothes. While the cooking gatherings will be analysed in Chapter 3, I will proffer a response to Lola Arias’ piece *Mi vida después* (2009) in Chapter 4. In so doing, I wish to explore how encounters with that traumatic past could bring to light new complicities and desires, with particular emphasis on the struggles of younger generations to build their own spaces in the present.

In addressing the experience of mourning beyond conventional frameworks, I also attempt to consider the ways in which queer theory and performance studies can become critical tools for approaching the non-normative affiliations that have emerged in the wake of political violence in Argentina. As Heather Love argues, loss can be ‘*the form – of intimacy*’.⁶ Drawing upon this, I will examine the specific forms of non-conventional intimate ties that have been built in Argentina in response to loss. In a recent *GLQ* special issue on ‘queer bonds’, the editors Joshua Weiner and Damon Young include within the term all those ties ‘that appear under different conditions of negation, connections and constraints beyond the contractual agreements between autonomous, positively defined subjects as presumed in liberal theories of the social’.⁷ This framework is productive in the context of my project. It enables me to conceive as ‘queer bonds’ those forms of relationality that contest the biological narratives of injury accounted by the relatives of the victims in Argentina. In so doing, my project both intervenes in queer theory and memory studies, providing a bridge between fields usually conceived as separate. In this sense, I argue that the focus on queer bonds can be fruitful for reinventing a politics of remembering for Argentina, one that

⁶ Heather Love, ‘The Art of Losing’ in *Lost and Found; Queering the Archive*, ed. by Mathias Danbolt, Jane Rowley and Louis Wolthers (Copenhagen: Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art, 2009), pp. 69–85, (p. 82). Love’s emphasis.

⁷ Joshua Weiner and Damon Young, ‘Queer Bonds’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17.2-3 (2011), 223–241 (p.223).

can re-shape not only the perception of the past but also of the future.

The myth of the ‘wounded family’

In order to contest the biological normativity that marked Argentina’s post-dictatorial scene, it is necessary to explore first how it was constituted. In the wake of loss, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Madres*), the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo (*Abuelas*), the Relatives (*Familiares*), the Children (H.I.J.O.S.), and the Siblings (*Herman@s*) of the ‘disappeared’ have evoked their biological ties to the missing to forge their claims for justice. Biological kinship has been the motor of their political activism. As Jelin argues, a monopoly of blood, memory and pain was established.⁸ For more than 30 years the evocation of a community of blood worked as an instrument of political intervention. To some extent, this surplus of kinship titles also responds to the military discourse, which evoked the idea of a ‘big family’ as the basic cell of the nation. As Jelin writes:

While the military deployed the repression in the name of a strong father to destroy the infected tissues and re-establish the natural equilibrium of the supposed Grand Argentine Family, the associations of the victims ultimately denounced a crime against the family and constructed its practices not as a metaphor but grounded in literal kin relations.⁹

Although this framework has been important, I suggest that the expanded version of kinship that shapes the current democratic period requires a different approach. My argument has different layers. In a recent article, the Argentine intellectual Horacio González provides a fruitful insight to understand further this obsession with kinship inherited from the dictatorship.¹⁰ He argues that, by stealing newborn babies from those whom it defined as political enemies, that state terrorism finally essayed a reconstruction of the national lineage of kinship. In this vein, the dictatorship can be conceived as an attempt at re-foundation of the family through an extreme bio-

⁸ Elizabeth Jelin, ‘The Politics of Memory: The Human Rights Movements and the Construction of Democracy in Argentina’, *Latin American Perspectives*, 21.2 (1994), 38-58 (p. 53).

⁹ Jelin, ‘Victims, Relatives, and Citizens in Argentina’, p. 182.

¹⁰ Horacio González, ‘Filiaciones argentinas’, *Página 12*, 29 June 2011, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-171044-2011-06-29.html> [accessed 14 July 2011]

political power. In fact, when democracy returned, the re-establishment of biological affiliation appeared as a crucial strategy on the part of the relatives of the victims. For them, but also for the extended Argentine society, the reconstruction of the broken families appeared as the main form of social restoration. Drawing upon this, a biological, and, thereby, essentialist form of truth was constituted; one that was ultimately attached to blood. Although there are also organizations that have not assumed the kinship tie as the principle for public recognition, a remarkable entanglement between blood and truth was ultimately imposed on the whole society.¹¹

As the Argentine researcher Virginia Vecchioli argues, the democratic state also played a crucial role in naturalizing the human rights claim as a family issue.¹² By creating categories such as ‘the relatives of the victims of the state terrorism’, consecutive governments produced the legal framework in which recognition of the victim became attached to the family. The full status of the ‘relatives’ was crafted when in 1994 the state passed the law of economic reparation for the victims, which defined the disappeared as those who in ‘most of the cases have been taken away from their families’.¹³ Following from this, the condition of the victim became not only a kinship tie but also a legal figure. Thus, the ‘disappeared’ re-emerged into the public scene as the exclusive property of the relatives, who were themselves, via the reifying tie of blood, transformed into victims.

I contend that this misleading overlap between truth and lineage staged a fundamental paradox in the aftermath of violence. By assuming a demand for justice based on blood, the democratic government transferred a familial narrative of victimization to the whole nation. A false equation between the universal abstraction of human rights and the particular position of those ‘directly affected’ by violence emerged. This biological restriction absented all those who have not been directly touched by violence. Rather, it imposed the injured condition of the relatives as the only condition of sharing. Only by qualifying as victims could certain subjects reach a

¹¹ The Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS) works as a counter case against the familial frame of the human rights associations. Although it was originally created by a group of relatives of the disappeared, it didn’t assume blood as the principle of public distinction.

¹² Virginia Vecchioli, ‘La nación como familia. Metáforas políticas en el movimiento argentino por los derechos humanos’ in *Cultura y política en etnografías sobre la Argentina*, ed. by Sabina Frederic and Germán Soprano (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2005), pp. 241-270 (p. 255).

¹³ Quoted by Vecchioli, ‘La nación como familia’, p. 257.

privileged position within Argentina's memory struggles.

Still, this process did not follow a straight path. Diverse forms of support and care also contested this biological normativity. In fact, the relatives' association (the *Madres*, *Abuelas*, H.I.J.O.S.) created affective arrangements that do not correspond to the nuclear family model. Although they all evoked conventional family titles, I suggest that these kin-associations paradoxically staged different forms of 'queer bond'. In this respect, while defining non-normative forms of kinship, Judith Butler describes queer relations as those that 'do not conform to the nuclear family model and that draw on biological and non biological relations, exceeding the reach of current juridical conceptions, functioning according to non formalizable rules.'¹⁴ In a parallel way, I wish to make the case that the Argentine relatives' associations reworked conventional conceptions of kinship and finally *queered* conventional family bonds. For instance, the *Abuelas* have attached their demands for justice to a scientific performance of blood (including DNA tests as proof of 'true' identity); however, the very existence of such organisation interrogates traditional accounts of kinship. The experience of loss queried and transformed the very idea of the family. It brought into light a new form of public-intimacy. Currently, in Argentina, *Madre* (Mother), *Abuela* (grandmother) or even *hijo* (son) do not necessarily refer to biological ties. This is perhaps the most paradoxical heritage left by the dictatorship violence.

Precisely, my project brings those queer bonds to the foreground to examine the alternative forms of support, love and care that have become possible in the aftermath of violence. Yet, I am not suggesting that the language of the family should be excised from critical analysis. Rather, I propose to develop further the concept of kinship from a queer framework to address the new affiliations at play in contemporary Argentina. This theoretical approach becomes credible, since as Butler writes, 'queer' will remain a term that 'can never be fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purpose'.¹⁵ My project is also informed by pressing 'political

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 102.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 111.

purposes': to re-invent a politics of mourning that can host wider sectors of Argentine society. In order to map my project, I shall present some cases to illustrate the new affiliations that have emerged in the face of loss. First, I will show how the *Madres* of Plaza de Mayo's famous statement, '*Nuestros hijos nos dieron la vida*' ('Our children gave birth to us'), can be established as a point of departure for an alternative lineage of kinship.

***Madres*, the basis for a queer mourning**

The story is well known. In April 1977 at the height of the military period a group of women took over Buenos Aires' central square clamouring for the '*aparición con vida*' ('alive appearance') of their children. Over more than 30 years, the *Madres*' circles around the *Pirámide de Mayo* became a strange mobile installation, the material choreography of an endless trauma. In those terms, I would like to revise the political implications of a process that appears to be the fetishised iteration of a biological motherhood. In so doing, I wish to explore the extent to which the *Madres*' performance was a prelude to alternative kinship arrangements that go beyond normative ties.

When democracy was restored in 1983, the 'disappearances', far from being mysterious acts of magic, were revealed as part of a systematic plan of kidnapping, torture and execution. While later investigations proved that more than 9,000 people were killed during the state terrorism, 30,000 was the number that reached iconic status in the claims for justice. 'Never again' became the cry raised by human rights associations and by the newly democratic government, which began the prosecution of the main leaders of the military regime. In 1985, the leaders of the Military Junta were condemned in an historic trial. However, in 1986 and 1987 the 'Full Stop' and 'Due Obedience' – the so-called 'laws of impunity' – put an end to most prosecutions.¹⁶ In 1990, in the name of a supposed 'national reconciliation', President

¹⁶ In 1986, the 'Full Stop' Law 23493 was passed by the National Congress, dictating the end of investigation and prosecution against people accused of political violence during the dictatorship (excluding the cases of identity forgery and forced disappearance of minors). President Raúl Alfonsín proposed the law in a context of strong military pressure. The decision was complemented by the *Ley de Obediencia Debida* (Law of Due Obedience), which exempted subordinates from accusation when they were carrying out orders. Both laws were repealed by the National Congress in 2003, and then definitely voided as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice on 14 June 2005.

Carlos Menem ‘forgave’ most of the military that had already been condemned. The so-called *indulto* was taken in spite of strong resistance on the part of most of Argentine civil society.

During all these years, the *Madres*’ performance did not stop. Thirty-four years later, to the bystander’s eyes, the scene has changed little, except that the women have gradually aged in this most public of places. Every Thursday at 3 pm, dressed in middle class attire, their grey hair covered by white scarves, endlessly walking arm in arm, at a slow and persistent pace, and carrying the pictures of their missing children, these women seem to have done nothing but repeat a mourning circle in the midst of Argentine society. Nowadays, the *Madres*’ fight may appear to have become a sort of redundant live national monument of grief. I contend that there is still something *wild* encrypted in their mourning bodies, a sort of *stubbornness* that goes beyond pedagogy, a material vibration that points to a non-verbal dimension of trauma. Elsewhere I’ve argued that the *Madres*’ act of mourning animated an unwanted form of body art, which was driven by a force not entirely human.¹⁷ Here I would like to suggest that this performance could be thought of as the origin of a deviant lineage that reverses blood.

My argument critically engages with Diana Taylor’s influential work on the *Madres*’ performance. Taylor, an American feminist and author of a defining study of gender and performance under the Argentine military dictatorship, argues that the *Madres* destabilised the military and ‘called attention to the fact that motherhood was a social, not just biological, construct’.¹⁸ Still, in her perspective, the women ‘consciously’ manipulated their biological function as an enactment of ‘defenseless mothers’, leaving ‘a restrictive patriarchal system basically unchallenged’.¹⁹ In those terms, Taylor finally argues that the *Madres* were trapped in a ‘bad script’.²⁰ Against Taylor’s scholarship, I wish to propose that the *Madres* performed a type of sovereignty beyond blood.

¹⁷ For further development on this argument see Cecilia Sosa, ‘On Mothers and *Spiders*: A Face-to-Face Encounter with Argentina’s Mourning’, *Memory Studies*, 4.3 (2011), 63-72.

¹⁸ Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s Dirty War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p.191.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, p. 191.

²⁰ Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, p. 203.

This argument draws upon Butler's important work on kinship, mostly developed in *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. As much as, for Butler, Antigone enacts a 'deformation and displacement of kinship', I suggest that the *Madres* evoked an idea of motherhood that became a perversion of the political sphere.²¹ Despite being enunciated in terms of blood, their activism was not 'naturally' reproductive, but the emergence of a political fight. In fact, their action was from the beginning attached to a public space. On these grounds, they performed a claim that haunted the whole nation. Moreover, the *Madres* did not exist as a collective subject prior to the event of their children's disappearance. This was the inaugurating scene for the group's coming into being. In fact, the group addressed this peculiar constitution through a main slogan: '*Nuestros hijos nos dieron la vida*' ('Our children gave birth to us'). This major statement accounts for an irregular inversion of biological roles, which actually breaks 'straight times' framed by traditional family narratives. In this line, I suggest that this reversion of biological kinship can also be read in tune with Lee Edelman's important work on queer temporality, which shows how heteronormativity acts as 'the guardian of temporal (re)production'.²² By presenting their offspring as giving birth to them, the *Madres* also contested reproductive temporalities, suggesting a new sense of community between the dead and the living. Thus, the *Madres* showed how time as the medium of advent can be deferred, refused, and contested from a non-biological perspective. In so doing, they presented themselves as subjects not constrained by a logic of reproduction, but capable of proposing an experimental form of kinship. I suggest that this inversion of biological sequences ultimately sheds light on a non-normative lineage in the face of loss.

In January 1986 the original group split up. Since I have already considered the nuances of this division elsewhere, here I would like to draw attention to a particular aspect of this division.²³ By the early 1980s, the first mass graves were found, and hope diminished that the disappeared may still be alive. Right before the emergence of these facts, a section of the *Madres* led by Hebe Bonafini, whose rephrased food-activism at a former detention camp will be discussed in Chapter 3, persisted in

²¹ Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 24.

²² Lee Edelman in Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, & Roderick Ferguson, 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13. 2-3 (2007), 177-195 (p. 181).

²³ Sosa, 'On Mothers and *Spiders*', pp. 63-72.

demanding '*aparición con vida*'. By becoming stuck in the affective resonances of an impossible slogan, Bonafini's group enacted an oppositional form of temporality, one that from a traditional perspective appeared to have no future. Even so, the impossible claim persisted in time. When in 1988 President Raúl Alfonsín's 'laws of impunity' put an end to the prosecutions of the military, the radical group of *Madres* still clamoured for the appearance of all the missing bodies that became their 'children'. Flowing outside language, this socialised form of maternity animated a queer narrative of kinship for the nation's future.²⁴ If the potential disturbance of kinship involved in this group of *Mothers* was not perceived as such, it was mainly because successive democratic administrations confined them to the margins of a 'wounded' but still normative 'family'. Nonetheless, this restrictive frame has started to be displaced. In fact, the Kirchnerist administrations imposed a turning point in this bloodline chain of victims by proposing a non-biological adoption of trauma, as I will now explore.

A new era of memory and 'happiness'

In the period inaugurated by Nestor Kirchner's government in 2003, the national trauma was officialised. For the first time a government embraced the position of the victims, assuming mourning as a national commitment. During his inaugural speech before the United Nations' General Assembly, Kirchner declared: 'We are the sons and daughters of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.'²⁵ By casting himself within the 'wounded family', the former president presented himself as part of the lineage inaugurated by violence. For some critics, this strategy was perceived as a dubious manoeuvre on the part of a government that had no 'narrative', 'heroic or otherwise, on which to build popular appeal'.²⁶ In an unintentional way, the 'new' official discourse implicitly contested the monopoly of blood: it managed to introduce a political displacement within the biological normativity staged by the relatives.

²⁴ Hebe de Bonafini's group of *Madres* has been recently embroiled in an episode of corruption that will be addressed in Chapter 3.

²⁵ In the original: 'Somos los hijos e hijas de las Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo' (my translation). The presidential speech was conducted on 25 September 2003, <http://constitucionweb.blogspot.com/2010/02/discurso-de-asuncion-de-presidente.html> [accessed 13 December 2010]

²⁶ Celia Suszterman, 'Argentina: Democracy by Default' in *Opendemocracy.net*, 26 July 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/celia-szusterman/argentina-democracy-by-default-0> [accessed 20 October 2011]

Indeed, the President – self-invested as the figure of the ‘son’ – showed how the lineage of loss was not only restricted to those who had been ‘directly affected’ by violence but could be inhabited by those who, for any reason, assumed mourning as a personal commitment.

Throughout the current period, the use of the language of the family has become a persistent political strategy. In fact, the ex-President Kirchner habitually addressed his speeches to the relatives of the victims. As I will consider further in Chapter 3, on 24 March 2004, the *Escuela Mecánica de la Armada* (Navy School of Mechanics, ESMA), the main detention camp during the dictatorship was recovered for civil society and officially transformed into a ‘Space of Memory’. That day, the former president greeted his ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, and congratulated the mothers, the grandmothers, the relatives, and the children for their ‘model of struggle.’²⁷ As bearing witness to this non-normative family in mourning, two other speakers stood next to the former leader -- Juan Cabandié and María Isabel Prigione Greco -- both abducted children who were born at ESMA during their parents’ arrest. Only three months after discovering his biological origin, Cabandié declared: ‘I am my birth parents’.²⁸ This statement could be conceived as the counterpart of the one adopted by the *Madres*, ‘Our Children gave birth to us’. Standing next to the abducted man, the President of the nation – finally auto-promoted as the new ‘son’ – officialised this injured heritage. Since then, the power of blood has been countersigned as inevitably political.

In the context of an unprecedented and belligerent human rights’ politics, the Kirchnerist administrations also provided the fundamental impulse to overrule the laws that granted immunity to the military. From 2006, massive trials started, prosecuting those responsible for the dictatorship’s human rights’ violations.²⁹ Throughout this period, the flags of the victims became the main political platform. In

²⁷ Jelin, ‘Victims, Relatives, and Citizens in Argentina’, p. 195.

²⁸ During the following years, Juan Cabandié started a rapid political career. He is now one of the leaders of the official party ‘Frente para la Victoria’ and in July 2011 was re-elected as legislator of the city of Buenos Aires. See Cabandié’s personal website: <http://juancabandie.blogspot.com/> [accessed 5 December 2011] Cabandie’s story will be explored further in Chapter 4 while considering Lola Arias’ production *Mi vida después* (2009).

²⁹ In 2005, the Argentine Supreme Court declared the nullity of the so-called ‘laws of impunity’ and prosecutions were allowed once again.

December 2007, Kirchner's wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, continued this process, and on 23 October 2011 she was re-elected for a second period with 54% of the votes. The presidential couple acted as the main sponsor, even the 'godfathers' of this lineage of loss. It is my argument that during the Kirchnerist period, the discourse of blood was transformed into the new moral order that became officially expropriated from its biological basis. In this context, memory became mandatory. The government now prescribes the claims of the 'direct' victims: a new era of 'happiness' had begun.

In order to examine this process, I suggest that it is productive to consider Sara Ahmed's critique of normative forms of happiness. In her recent scholarship, she argues that 'to be bound *to* happiness is to be bound *by* what has already been established as good'.³⁰ In a similar vein, I contend that during the Kirchnerist period, memory embodied the figure of the political good, and almost the 'happy narrative' of the new lineage. As a response to this tradition, the broad series of materials that inform my thesis share a non-normative impulse; they show how memory always exceeds the margins of duty. The cases included in my project follow a specific timeline. Except for the mapping case that focused on the *Madres*, and some periods of H.I.J.O.S.' activism, the rest of the experiences explored in these pages correspond to the period from Kirchner's first speech in December 2003 to the re-election of his wife in October 2011. I have also included a brief example of the expanded performance of blood in Chapter 5 that reaches the beginning of 2012 since it offers a splendid image of the process of 'conversion' that is currently in place. Although many of these interventions come from sectors close to the 'wounded family', they also contested victimhood as the only mode of engaging with loss. As I will also explore in Chapter 5 while considering *Los topos*, a twisted biography written by the son of a murdered couple, the heritages of violence shed light on non-biological forms of ties that became transmitted, queered and reversed throughout extended sectors of Argentine society. Finally, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, this is the lineage that now furtively governs the country.

Coming from a broad spectrum of theatrical, cinematic and literary performances, the

³⁰ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 133. Ahmed's emphasis.

materials that inform my project establish breaks and interruptions within the official duty of memory. Drawing from Ahmed's insight, I suggest that these practices can be thought of as 'killjoy' discourses; they are voices that contest and get 'in the way of an organic solidarity', which in this case is the happy narrative of blood consecrated by the relatives and the state.³¹ These voices challenge the language of loss prescribed by the 'wounded family', envisaging new vocabularies and images to rethink the experience of trauma. By turning discourses of victimization upside down, they offer insurgent and playful versions of the narrative of blood. Although these interventions are not politically articulated, they announce that it is still possible to imagine a politics of memory for expanded sectors of the civil society. Following this 'killjoy path', my project moves beyond mandatory forms of memory. Even so, this assignment does not attempt to create grounds for over-expectations. Rather, it aims to uncover an expanded collection of pleasure emerging out of grief.

Paradoxes of blood

In order to provide a grounded example of these killjoy narratives, I would like to introduce the case of a young woman who was separated from her biological sibling during the military regime. This encounter was a turning point in my fieldwork. It gave me a clear sense of how the power of blood was already undermined from inside of the 'wounded family'. After her parents' kidnapping, Mariana Eva Pérez, who is now a theatre director, grew up with her grandparents in close contact with *Abuelas*, since both of her grandmothers were active members of the organisation. While searching intensively for her missing brother, she was in charge of *Abuelas's Archivo Biográfico Familiar* (Familial Biographical Archive), an impressive collection of oral testimonies, which attempts to provide the abducted grandchildren with their missing background.³² After years of looking, her brother was finally found. He had been abducted and raised by a family close to the military and eventually regretted having performed the DNA test that established his biological identity. The two siblings did

³¹Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 213.

³² The Familial Biographical Archive was created in 1998 by the *Abuelas* de Plaza de Mayo. It aims to reconstruct the story of those disappeared, whose children were born in captivity or kidnapped alongside their parents. It includes testimonies from relatives, friends, and colleagues of the disappeared parents. The archive is part of a collaborative project with the Faculty of Social Science, University of Buenos Aires. See <http://www.abuelas.org.ar/archivo.htm> [accessed 26 April, 2011]

not manage to engage with each other on harmonious terms. In *Instrucciones para un coleccionista de mariposas* ('Instructions for Butterfly Collectors', 2005) Pérez acknowledges the unexpected disruption of emotions involved in the encounter with her brother. If all the play is poignant, one of the passages is particularly clear. It reads:

I hate what your appropriators have made of you. I hate to see the grandmothers suffering for your fault [...] I hate you because you are so strange and so different from me that I cannot stand the idea that in this life you are the one who resembles me the most.³³

The piece was released in August 2005 at the *Teatro el Nudo*, a well-known theatre in the central area of Buenos Aires. It was part of the series *Teatro por la Identidad* (Theatre for Identity), a movement of theatre-directors, sponsored by *Abuelas* since 2001, which aims to find the missing children that still live under false identities. The night of the premiere all the grandmothers were at the venue. Nonetheless, they did not like the piece and, eventually, the director was expelled from the organisation. Since then, Pérez has developed as a writer and her plays have been translated in English and French. Her forthcoming book *Diario de una princesa Montonera* ('Diary of a Montonero Princess', 2012) compiles the texts published in her blog in which she countersigns the experience of being a daughter of murdered activists.³⁴ In an interview conducted in Buenos Aires in April 2009, this is how she tried to make sense of her expulsion from the group:

Abuelas did not forgive me for not getting along with my recovered brother. He wasn't judged for not being able to get closer to my family but I was judged for not supporting him. They expected me to have an endless patience, which I did not have. I was told that I could not be in the organisation any longer because my behaviour [with regard to her brother]

³³ In the original: 'Odio lo que tus apropiadores hicieron de vos. Odio ver a las abuelas sufrir por tu culpa y odio tus putos tiempos que no corren a la misma velocidad que el tiempo de ellas. Te odio porque me resultás tan extraño y tan diferente de mí que no soporto la idea de que seas lo que más se me parece en la vida' (my translation).

³⁴ See Mariana Eva Pérez, 'Diario de una princesa Montonera', <http://princesamontonera.blogspot.com/> [accessed 23 December 2011]

was a threat to human rights.³⁵

I suggest that this case is especially fruitful for understanding the paradoxes that haunt the ‘happy narrative’ of the relatives. I suggest that the expulsion of the ‘rebellious’ sister from *Abuelas* could be understood as a family drama. In fact, during the last 35 years, the group has pursued globally recognised work in the recovery of the 500 newborn babies estimated to have been abducted during the dictatorship. By December 2011 the group had recovered 105 children who grew up with false identities. In this period, the organisation managed to develop a blood test that allowed the establishment of genetic ties with one generation missing. Maybe as a form of reassuring this notorious endeavour, *Abuelas* has instinctively developed a public discourse that strongly advocates the power of blood. Each time a new ‘grandchild’ is recovered, this normative bloodline seems to be confirmed. Although *Abuelas*’s daily work acknowledges the difficulties involved in each reunion (there is a team of expert psychologists which works inside the organisation to assist both recovered grandchildren and biological families), nonetheless, their public discourse has established a strong linkage between truth and blood. The celebratory mood of presenting the reunion of siblings relies on the idea that the power of blood can help to heal all potential differences. The same unwritten script stipulates that whenever the siblings are back together a form of ‘natural’ justice will finally be accomplished.

I would like to suggest that the discourse of the ‘rebel sister’ came to defy this security. It threatened the ‘happy narrative’ of reunion that regulates the life of the organisation. Indeed, the ‘defiant’ sister grew up inside *Abuelas*, she was already part of the ‘wounded family’; therefore, she was expected to play by the rules. By contrast, while exposing her ambivalent feelings in relation to her recovered brother, the ‘rebel sister’ became the *killjoy*. While expanding on this figure, Ahmed argues that the killjoys are ‘those who refuse the promise of happiness [and] become the cause of bad feelings, which causes unhappiness to take form in specific ways’.³⁶ Drawing upon

³⁵ The interview with Mariana Eva Pérez was conducted on 27 April 2009 in Buenos Aires. All the quotes included in this chapter belong to this talk. In the original: ‘A mí en Abuelas no se me perdonó que no me llevara bien con mi hermano recuperado. A él no se lo juzga por no haberse podido acercar mas a mí familia pero a mí si se me juzga que yo no haya sabido contener, o aguantar. Se me exigía una paciencia infinita que no tuve. Me expulsaron de la organización diciendo que mi conducta era una amenaza para los derechos humanos’ (my translation).

³⁶ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 215.

this, I want to make the case that, by making public her ‘bad feeling’ in relation to her brother, the ‘rebel sister’ brought a form of ‘unhappiness’ to *Abuelas*. That is why she came to be perceived as a betrayer. Thereby, the organic response from the organization was expulsion.

The case of the rebellious sister enables me to address further a crucial dilemma that was configured during recent years. I would like to suggest the centrality of blood in Argentina’s post-dictatorship period created a paradoxical situation that raises crucial queries around how to conceive a politics of memory for the aftermath of violence. The constant appellation of a ‘true identity’ performed by *Abuelas*, and legitimately shared by most of society, can be read in this direction. This reliance on blood reinforces a biological determinism that I suggest conceiving of as an implicit form of ‘racialization of the intimate sphere’, as Eng argues in a very different context.³⁷ While considering the cases of transnational adoption in the USA, Eng notices that racial differences are denied once the children – mostly young girls coming from Asia – come to live with their brand new wealthy American families. He addresses this seemingly contradictory process as the politics of ‘colour-blindness’, in which while queer ties are welcome and assimilated, any disparities of race, gender, class and nation are erased within the privatised sphere of the new families.³⁸ Although the contexts are clearly different, the resonances of Eng’s expression contribute to shed light on the forceful way in which blood intervenes in the Argentine scene. I would like to suggest that in the name of the legitimate ‘right of identity’, a subtle form of racialisation of blood comes to be established.

Drawing on this, I would like to suggest that it was a politics of forceful blindness that expelled Pérez from *Abuelas*. The organisation preferred not to ‘see’ the difficulties that she underwent after re-encountering her sibling, at least in public, let alone on a theatre stage. Thereby, they opted to accuse her of acting against human rights, which in this context can be read as behaving ‘against blood’. Ultimately, this heightened performance of blood can be understood as an unintentional form of preservation and reassurance of the group’s fundamental fight. Nonetheless, in the context of an unprecedentedly vigorous human rights politics, this subtle form of backlash has

³⁷ Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, p. 11.

³⁸ Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, p. 94.

remained largely unexplored and almost a ‘taboo’ issue, not only among the relatives but also among the scholars working in the field of memory. To some extent, it would be to adopt the role of the *killjoy*. My project wants to address this ethical and political challenge. The Argentine scholar and director of the *Biblioteca Nacional* (National Library), Horacio González has recently suggested that politics should be conceived as the opportunity to create ties that go beyond primary bonds, which he defined as non-normative ‘families of choice’.³⁹ Drawing upon this, the main question that underpins my project is how to recreate a more creative politics of memory, which does not compromise the need to establish the biological identity of the abducted children (named by *Abuelas* as the ‘right to the identity’), at a time that gives room to the new affiliations that have emerged in the wake of violence.

With these ideas in mind, my research aims at exploring these unconventional, queer bonds that emerged from loss. Indeed, these alternative ties do not admit simple solutions. Each chapter of this thesis examines different expressions of these hushed non-biological attachments that refuse to be hosted by existent frameworks. Current times demand novel critical interventions. Only by thinking about the failure of traditional narratives of kinship will it be possible to address the forceful but still hopeful changes operated in the realm of the family by dictatorship violence. This is the invitation that I shall respond to in the following pages.

About siblings and grandsons

I would like to focus now on two contrasting cases that expose the way in which an expanded language of the family is already in play in contemporary Argentina. By the beginning of 2010, the so-called ‘Noble Case’ captured the public’s attention. The owner of the national newspaper *Clarín*, one of most important media groups in the country, Ernestina Herrera de Noble, adopted the siblings Felipe and Marcela in 1976, who were suspected of having been born in captivity during the dictatorship. For more than nine years, the siblings refused to undertake the blood test that would establish their origins. After a succession of legal stages, in which *Abuelas* intervened as a prosecutor, the siblings were finally forced to take the tests. For months, Argentina

³⁹ González, ‘Filiaciones Argentinas’, *Página 12*, 29 June 2011, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-171044-2011-06-29.html> [accessed 14 July 2011]

awaited the DNA results to corroborate whether or not the youngsters were descendants of the disappeared. A national operetta of blood took place, which I've discussed in detail elsewhere.⁴⁰ Anxieties, however, were justified. In another bitter irony of the dictatorship's legacy, two siblings, presumably stolen from their activist parents, could inherit one of the biggest fortunes in the country. Against all expectations, in July 2011 the DNA test proved to be negative.⁴¹

Nonetheless, the argument voiced by the siblings to justify their refusal to subject themselves to the examinations deserves some extra attention. Marcela and Felipe argued that they did not need to test their biological origins since they had no doubts regarding their mother: '35 years ago, she chose us as her children and everyday we choose her as our mum. Nobody can ever destroy this tie,' they stated in a video released in April 2010.⁴² As becomes clear, the narrative in play was still the language of kinship, except one strangely displaced, subtly queered from its biological foundation. Public declarations of human rights associations confessed themselves unable to address the uncertainties of the case. 'The Noble case has been transformed into a war that should never have existed', argued Carlotto at that time.⁴³ The scandal, which bore the hallmarks of a cheesy tabloid story, demonstrated how the idea of the family iterated by the Nobles also perturbed traditional discourses of blood. It also confirmed the need to move into a rephrased conception of kinship.

Many stories of recovered grandchildren also propose a displacement of conventional ties. For instance, Pedro Sandoval was born in a detention camp and he grew up with his illegal appropriator, Víctor Rey, a member of the army who passed for a high school teacher, as he also worked as such. In 2009, as part of the re-opening of the trials against those responsible for human rights violations, Rey was condemned to 16

⁴⁰ For an expanded analysis of the Noble case, see Cecilia Sosa 'Madres de Plaza de Mayo and *Los Rubios* (2003): Queering acts of Mourning in the Aftermath's of Argentina's Dictatorship' in *The Memory of State Terrorism in the Southern Cone. Argentina, Chile, Uruguay*, ed. by Vincent Druliolle, and Francesca Lessa (New York and London: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 63-85.

⁴¹ 'El primer cotejo de ADN dio negativo', 11 July 2011, *Página 12* <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/ultimas/20-172014-2011-07-11.html> [accessed 2 November 2011]

⁴² See 'Felipe y Marcela Herrera Noble por TV: "Nos sentimos perseguidos"', *La Nación*, April 22 2010, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1257076-felipe-y-marcela-noble-herrera-por-tv-nos-sentimos-perseguidos> [accessed 30 November 2011]

⁴³ In the original: 'Esto se está transformando en una guerra que no tendría que haber existido' (my translation). See *Perfil*, 1 April, 2010, http://www.perfil.com/contenidos/2010/04/01/noticia_0022.html [accessed 4 May 2010]

years in prison. Just the week earlier, the appropriator decided to tell Pedro about his origins. 'I didn't understand anything. One can imagine what it means to be adopted but not being a son of the disappeared. I was totally lost', Pedro Sandoval commented during a TV show.⁴⁴ Indeed, a normativity that only relies on blood cannot account for the underestimated linkages built between abducted children and their illegal appropriators; especially when the appropriators were complicit with the death of the biological parents, making these attachments already embedded in crime.

Threatened by his appropriator, for many months Sandoval also refused to conduct a DNA test. Later on, he confessed to have adulterated the evidence by using his toothbrush to clean the teeth of his dog, knowing that the brush was one of the elements that the judge would order to confiscate as part of the genetic examination. If for a long time Sandoval could not deal with his iniquitous background, eventually he learned how to cope with it. From his personal website, he now proudly parades the condition of recovered grandson:

My parents left me the biggest family a human being can possible have. Despite the pain, I have a hundred siblings [...] with some of them it works as if we had known each other since birth. I have thousands of aunts and uncles. They are the ones who were with my mum and dad. With some of them they shared their activism. With others, they shared captivity. Today, I have many grannies and mums who are willing to embrace me as soon as they see my face [...] I wouldn't change this family for anything.⁴⁵

As a gesture of commitment with his brand new affiliations, Sandoval signed the passage *Nieto 84* ('Grandson 84'). It could be argued that his testimony is just an

⁴⁴ In the original: 'Yo no entendía nada. Uno sabía qué era ser adoptado pero no hijo de desaparecidos. Estaba totalmente perdido' (my translation). The testimony corresponds to the 21 September 2010 edition of the television show 678. An excerpt can be found here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtUPBFOhCs8> [accessed 18 November 2010]

⁴⁵ In the original: 'Mis viejos me dejaron la familia mas grande que un ser humano puede tener. A pesar del dolor, yo tengo 100 hermanos [...] con algunos de ellos es como si nos conociéramos de cuna a cuna. Tengo miles de tías y miles de tíos, Son los cumpas que estuvieron con papa y mama. Algunos muy allegados, porque compartieron con mis viejos la militancia y otros compartieron el cautiverio. Hoy tengo un montón de abuelas y madres. que con tan solo verme, me llenan de abrazos y besos [...]. Yo a esta familia, no la cambio por nada (my translation). <http://alejandropedrosandovalfontana.blogspot.com/> [accessed 7 November 2010]

expression of the ‘happy narrative’ supported by the relatives, a mere iteration of the script that underwrites the illusion that the recovery of biological backgrounds is enough guarantee of fulfilment. Nonetheless, it also becomes clear that the ties that Sandoval refers to do not correspond to any traditional family. In fact, his testimony shows how someone who first grew up within a family structure forged through violence was able to recreate alternative engagements to cope with the ongoing effects of trauma.

In fact, Sandoval managed to work through his traumatic story by means of an intense political activism. As with many others, he found a new ‘place in the world’ under the sponsorship of the Kirchnerist administrations, which promoted the militancy of the recovered children as part of their own political legitimacy. Sandoval’s experience can be read alongside the idea of ‘mourning activism’, developed by Carrie Hamilton in her scholarship on trauma, memory and political pleasure. There, she argues that mourning can lead to merriment while processed through activism.⁴⁶ In this sense, Sandoval’s case reveals how certain forms of public memory, usually associated with trauma, can be reversed through political involvement. I would like to suggest that Sandoval went into a process of ‘conversion’ that enabled him to reinvent his future while endorsing the official lineage of loss.

Working against simple closure, Sandoval’s public presentations do not stage a ‘happy script’ but a precarious mixture of vulnerability and empowerment. His trajectory shows how a recovered ‘grandson’ could manage to work through his traumatic past to find himself fully immersed within an expanded ‘family of choice’. Ultimately, Sandoval’s case points towards an expanded conception of the family in which a broad array of uncles, aunts, grannies, and siblings are embraced. His case also draws attention to how, in the wake of violence, the language of kinship is by no means exhausted by the mandates of blood. Rather, I suggest, traditional forms of tie can be re-inhabited through non-normative forms of intimacy, support, and care. In fact, Sandoval’s dramatic reinvention as public persona invites us to read the stories

⁴⁶ Carrie Hamilton, ‘Activist Memories: The Politics of Trauma and the Pleasures for Politics’ in *The Future of Memory*, ed. by Richard Crownshaw, Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 267-80 (p. 272). I am also indebted to Hamilton for accompanying me in the exploration of the subsequent parallel between recovered grandchildren and transgendered individuals explored in the following pages.

of the recovered children alongside the experience of transgendered individuals who also adopt new names, solidarities, affections, and a whole collection of expectations in relation to the past and future. Moreover, I will explore further a fictional variant of this transitioning while considering Felix Bruzzone's novella *Los topos* in Chapter 5. But for now I suggest that these processes of 'conversion' can be read as a 'coming out' within an expanded lineage of loss. In this process, Sandoval's political militancy worked as a form of physical and affective reparation that encompassed his 'transitioning' as recovered grandson.

Rehearsing trauma

As it has been widely acknowledged that since the 1990s, scholars working in the field of Humanities within Western institutions have become increasingly interested in memory issues, particularly those cases engaging with trauma.⁴⁷ While addressing this impact in the field of film studies, Susannah Radstone wisely names this trend as the 'oxymoronic popularity of trauma'.⁴⁸ As the cases I have explored above anticipate, my research critically engages with the rise of trauma theories and the so-called 'memory boom'. Against what Radstone defined as the 'victim culture', my project aims to intervene in these debates while revealing the productivity of trauma to generate unpredictable forms of affection, support and care beyond victimhood.⁴⁹ In this respect, I follow Ann Cvetkovich's important work on lesbian cultures in the USA to explicitly reject pathologised accounts of trauma.⁵⁰ By contrast, I seek to show how Argentine experience of loss contributed to build a new public culture of mourning in which alternative forms of pleasure were also delineated.

In so doing, my project considers performance as a privileged site for the exploration of trauma beyond victimhood frameworks. In a recent edition of *Performance Research*, the editors Mick Wallis and Patrick Duggan invite us to understand the trauma-symptom as 'a rehearsal, re-presentation, re-performance of the experience of

⁴⁷ Hamilton, 'Activist Memories: The Politics of Trauma and the Pleasures for Politics', p. 265.

⁴⁸ Susannah Radstone. 'Trauma and Screen Studies: opening the Debate', *Screen*, 42.2, (2001), 188-193 (p. 189).

⁴⁹ Susannah Radstone, 'Screening Trauma: *Forrest Gump*, Film and Memory', in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. by S. Radstone (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 89-95 (p. 90).

⁵⁰ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 11.

the trauma-event'.⁵¹ This perspective is particularly productive for my project since it not only permits us to consider the 'presentness' of the trauma-event alongside the 'liveness' of performance, but it also stresses the differential modes of engaging with broad audiences, which are not necessarily 'direct' victims of traumatic events.

In fact, thinking the intersection of trauma and performance also enjoins the latest accounts of Marianne Hirsch's well-known elaboration on 'post-memory'.⁵² In tune with Jens Andermann's perspective, my project aims at expanding the productivity of 'post-memory' in the context of Argentina's post-dictatorship not only to address the creative ways in which second generations deal with traumatic memories but also the untidy network of adoption of trauma developed by second-degree witnesses in the context of spectatorship.⁵³ In this sense, I will explore whether the affects constituted in performance may reanimate a sense of being together beyond bloodline restrictions. Moreover, my project also proposes a fruitful encounter between performance studies and affect theory to address non-verbal and non-conscious dimensions of experience; in particular, the forms of pleasure that may arise in the rehearsal of trauma. In this sense, I am committed to show how grief is not only related to hate, anger, or shame but also to humour, enthusiasm and hope. Moreover, my case studies can be conceived as different attempts to bring to light new languages to speak about loss. For instance, Chapter 1 addresses how black humour managed to reverse feelings of shame among the descendants of those missing. Chapter 3 explores how the cooking lessons organised at ESMA former detention camp may bring glimpses of exchange and hospitality to a landscape seemingly attached to death. Further, while considering Lola Arias' *Mi vida después* in Chapter 4, I will explore how the exchange of roles can create a common space beyond the stage. In this respect, Nicholas Ridout's conception of theatre as a 'vibratorium' will be particularly productive.⁵⁴ It will enable me to grasp the 'indecorous machine' of circulation of affects, as Ridout frames it, at disparate stages of mourning, for instance H.I.J.O.S.' festive streets demonstrations known as the *escraches*, or a park of sculptures that faces Buenos Aires' river.

⁵¹ Mick Wallis and Patrick Duggan, 'On Trauma', *Performance Research*, 16.1 (2011), 1-3 (p. 2).

⁵² Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Post-memory', *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008), 103-128.

⁵³ Jens Andermann, 'Returning to the Site of Horror: the Recovery of Clandestine Concentration Camps in Argentina', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 29.1 (2012, forthcoming).

⁵⁴ Nicholas Ridout, 'Welcome to the Vibratorium', *Senses & Society*, 3 (2008), 221-231 (p. 222).

In this context, it is important to bear in mind that the field of performance studies is particularly new in Argentina, where it does not exist as autonomous discipline of research. Despite the presence of a strong and lively community of theatre directors and practitioners, the country has not yet been consistently reached by the ‘performative turn’, which is widespread in universities further North.⁵⁵ As a result, my theoretical framework to approach Argentina’s post-dictatorship also involves an important distance from the kind of research undertaken within the local academia. In this sense, my project also benefits from a non-normative and, hopefully, original position to contest victimising accounts on memory and trauma. From there, I expect to contribute towards the emergence of a developing field.

Far from settling an account with the past, the materials explored within my project speak about intensities and emotions that are not settled and resist being archived. While resisting narratives of reconciliation, my research also intervenes in the discussion around justice, responsibility, forgiveness and affective reparation. In this respect, Vikki Bell’s work on Argentina’s democratic transition will be important. Drawing upon the ID picture of a young inmate at ESMA detention camp who survived his beholder, Bell makes a provocative case by arguing that the image stares ‘beyond death’, while enacting a persistent demand for justice, while also performing a resistance of ‘becoming-archive’, of ‘becoming past’.⁵⁶ This framework is productive in the context of my research since it enables me to explore the connection between arts and forms of justices beyond the legal. In this respect, I am also indebted to Eng’s research on the ways in which ‘psychic and affective reparation’ provide forms of *working through* the experience of trauma in opposition to political theories ‘which seek to write history into a definitive past’.⁵⁷

This methodological and critical framework becomes particularly productive since the peculiar temporality of Argentine grief refuses a linear historicism, as already

⁵⁵ I have explored the implications of doing performance research outside hegemonic centres within my presentation ‘From the South’, an appointed intervention at the round-table ‘Re-considering the Inter- and the Intra. Contested performances’, which took place at 17 Performance Studies International Conference (May 2011, Utrecht, Netherlands).

⁵⁶ Vikki Bell, ‘On Fernando’s Photograph: The Biopolitics of *Aparición* in Contemporary Argentina’, in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27.4 (2010), 69-89 (p. 82).

⁵⁷ Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship. Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, p. 196.

proposed through the analysis of the *Madres*' slogan 'Our children gave birth to us'. In this respect, my project also draws on an important roundtable discussion on 'queer temporality' attended by queer scholars such as working in the field of queer theory.⁵⁸ The work of the Medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw becomes especially relevant in the context of my project since it enables me to explore what she calls the 'queer historical impulse' of forging anachronistic encounters with the past.⁵⁹ This methodology will be useful in the analysis of the series of 'spectres' that convolute Lucrecia Martel's film *La mujer sin cabeza* (2009) and also Lucila Quieto's photographic essay, which features the descendant posing next to their forever-young 'disappeared' parents. At different levels, both works address the constitution of vibrant communities across time.

Queer theory will also be productive to frame my critique of Taylor's idea of 'DNA performance', the paradigm of public presentation based on biological kinship through which she addresses the activism developed by the descendants of the disappeared.⁶⁰ Although the concept of 'DNA of performance' is extremely rich, successive chapters of this thesis illustrate how the aftermath of violence witnesses a performance of blood that largely exceeds biological kinship. Finally, the use of the term 'queer' is worth clarifying once again. I do not seek to name the participants of this project as 'queer'. Rather, I insist on the value of exploring Argentina's aftermath of violence through the lens of queer studies in order to contest the biological normativity that has become hegemonic. The queer component of my project also points towards the constitution of a non-normative lineage in the face of loss that does not have biology as the primary bond. In doing so, this project encompasses how the narrative of the 'wounded family' collapses on stage.

The archive as a journey

This thesis faces a key methodological challenge. The forms of ties that are the centre of my analysis are not necessarily spoken and mostly exceed the practices of the

⁵⁸ Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, & Roderick Ferguson, 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', *GLQ*, 13. 2-3 (2007), 177-195

⁵⁹ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval- Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 1.

⁶⁰ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 175.

‘speaking subjects’. The problem that arises from there is how to document this expansion of kinship when it has not been articulated yet. At a deeper level, it also enhances the inherent paradox of writing and researching on affects. Cvetkovich provides assistance in sorting out this difficulty. In the catalogue of an art exhibition on queer archives, she argues that emotions and sexuality can only be archived indirectly.⁶¹ For that reason, art and cultural artefacts work as important archival practices. My project loosely draws from Cvetkovich’s invitation. By looking at different objects, landscapes, sites, and more extensively, a wide variety of cultural performances, I seek to gain access to the new affiliations that permeated Argentina in the post-dictatorship period. My project also engages with Cvetkovich’s idea of the ‘archive of feelings’ as an alternative model of conveying affects involved in traumatic experience. Through the exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, the term of ‘archive of feelings’ puts pressure on traditional forms of archiving, stressing the importance of considering alternative ‘forms of public history’, in this case to address the affective responses to loss that have emerged in contemporary Argentina.⁶²

Drawing from these methodological impulses, my project seeks to delineate a non-normative archive of mourning. The non-normative character of this archive draws both upon its form and its content. First, it does not focus on victimising narratives but on the pain and pleasures emerging from grief. Second, in order to explore alternative forms of transmission among less implicated audiences, it includes diverse experiences across different generations. In doing so, it also illuminates collective zones of enchantment that call into being new publics and audiences. The variety of materials and genres covered in my project is not innocently chosen. While proposing unusual encounters among experience, affects and time, my project wants to queer traditional repertoires of memory. It does not merely seek to re-collect things from the past, but rather it opens space for new voices and forms of public history in the present. In this sense, this archive can also be defined as a killjoy: it hampers the bloodline solidarity of the victims to suggest alternative narratives that stage different futures.

⁶¹ Ann Cvetkovich, ‘Photographing Objects: Art as Queer Archival Practice’, in *Lost and Found: Queering the Archive*, ed. by Mathias Danbolt, Jane Rowley and Louise Wolthers (Copenhagen: Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 2009), pp. 49-65 (p. 53).

⁶² Cvetkovich, ‘Photographing Objects’, p. 63.

Obviously, the cases included in this archive are not exhaustive but rather quite limited. As Jacques Derrida and Taylor argue, archives are constituted by exclusion, and even by violence. It is the very processes of selection, classification and presentation for later analysis that ‘makes an object archival’, Taylor writes.⁶³ Still, the idea of violence also touches the ontological constitution of this archive and its very possibility of existence. For Derrida, an archive always implies a topology, a law, a lineage and a commandment.⁶⁴ I suggest that in Argentina the lineage constituted by the ‘wounded family’ has put the archive ‘under arrest’. This hegemony has defined the content and shape of the possibility of memory. Nonetheless, I will argue that during recent years the *domiciliation* of this archive has started to be displaced: the aftermath of violence has witnessed a controversial displacement of the legitimacy of remembering from the ‘wounded family’ to a collective sense of co-ownership of trauma. Blood has been contested as the only refugee of memory. This non-normative archive encompasses the process of transference. It acts as an affective and mobile assemblage in which each chapter flows, echoes, develops, and problematises the others. These cases share a common impulse. While exposing the dramatic changes taking place in the realm of kinship, not only do they stage alternative ways of remembering, but also ways of thinking and living the present, while configuring plural forms of being after loss. As Derrida argues, archives not only record events but also produce them.⁶⁵ In this sense, this archive also *creates* these feelings of kinship that disturb the idea of a ‘wounded family’ as the only victim of the dictatorship. Also in this sense, this archive is intrinsically political as much as performative.

Regardless of their disparate forms, the materials included in this archive evoke an idea of responsibility that goes beyond the official ‘duty of memory’. They make present how the stories of the seemingly ‘non-affected’ can provide fresh images and vocabularies to account for alternative lines for the transmission of trauma. Every so often, this archive draws on the tensions between official and marginal narratives of

⁶³ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, p.19.

⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 2.

⁶⁵ Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, p. 17.

grief. Against attempts at reducing memory as a question of state, my case studies address unofficial forms of counter-memory. In this sense, this archive threatens the security of human rights narratives while proposing acts of memory that fall outside duty. In so doing, this project negotiates experiences taking place at the Memory Park, the 'recovered' ESMA, as well as official trials. It not only hosts stable texts such as films, theatre, and novels, but also precarious forms of feeling and knowledge, for instance, those that circulate through H.I.J.O.S.' dark jokes. At all different stages, my project proposes a close engagement with personal testimonies and lived experiences as a key method for dealing with loss.

Thesis structure

I would like to provide here a guiding map for this journey. All the chapters explore specific practices that illustrate non-conventional acts of mourning. In so doing, each chapter draws upon private and public archives, sometimes blurring the differences between one and another. Ultimately, each chapter produces a response to grief that interrogates official versions of the past.

In Chapter 1, I look at the forms of activism developed by H.I.J.O.S, the civic organisation formed by the children of the missing in 1995. I make the case that humour worked as a form of compensation for the descendants to cope with loss, especially during the 1990s when legal justice was exempt from the political arena. I argue that the dark sense of humour that permeated the group contributed to reverse individual feelings of shame, eventually empowering the descendants with a generational language to deal with trauma. This chapter also addresses the different political periods undergone by H.I.J.O.S. and the expectations raised by the re-opening of the trials during the Kirchnerist period.

In Chapter 2, I propose a dialogue between *Los Rubios* (Albertina Carri, 2003) and *M* (Nicolas Prividera, 2007), two unconventional 'post-memory' documentaries directed by descendants of the disappeared that deconstruct the cult of the victim. The section also includes an analysis of *La mujer sin cabeza/The Headless Woman* (2009), a feature directed by Lucrecia Martel, which proposes an immersive experience within the affects of complicity and denial unleashed by the dictatorship. I argue that the

affects explored within these films enlighten the many ways in which the traumatic past still resonates within the present.

In Chapter 3, I bring in an unusual performance that took place at ESMA, the main clandestine detention camp during Argentina's dictatorship. In the context of the heated debates about what to do with the infamous place, Hebe de Bonafini, the most famous of the *Madres*, developed a weekly open venue in which she combined political discussion with practical food recipes. By replacing her scarf with an apron, the old woman fought against the project of transforming the space into a museum. In this light, I consider how this gastronomic intervention proposed an ethical transformation of a site of loss.

In Chapter 4, I offer an analysis of *Mi vida después/My Life After* (2009), a piece directed by Lola Arias, a cutting edge theatre director who has not experienced the loss of her own relatives. The production follows a team of professional actors born during the dictatorship re-enacting the youth of their parents by wearing their old clothes. Drawing upon the interviews conducted with the director and the actors, I explore how the reverberations of the dictatorial period can serve to build new affiliations for the future.

In Chapter 5, I draw attention to *Los topos/The Moles* (2008), a novella written by Félix Bruzzone, whose parents were murdered during the dictatorship. I explore how the wild sense of humour that informs the book speaks to the sense of the comical that nurtured H.I.J.O.S. during the 1990s. Ultimately, I argue that *Los topos* prefigures the affective environment that surrounded ex-president Kirchner's death in October 2010 onwards. In so doing, it suggests a more fluid congeries of kinship, loss, and political heritage.

In the Conclusion, my thesis sheds light on the new forms of pleasure involved in these unconventional acts mourning, which might anticipate an idea of community that goes beyond bloodline settings. I follow some strands of personal biographies that have experienced different forms of affective reparation. Ultimately, I propose a brief reflection on *Monumento al Escape* (2001, Dennis Oppenheim), one of the installations allocated in the Memory Park that help us to envisage the new feelings of

kinship that have emerged in the face of loss.

This archive could be conceived as a passage or even a journey, one which goes from an experience of grief arrested in the hands of those ‘directly affected’ to more expanded modes of being inflicted by loss. In some sense, I wish to show how the house of mourning has been re-opened to hosts the foundling memories of those who were originally excluded from the ‘wounded family’. As the mapping of some of the cases already demonstrates, this archive not only introduces performance as a privileged site for the exploration of trauma, but also to transform it. In so doing, it seeks to discover, or produce, the invisible bond that ties together those alternative narratives of grief. This archive follows and encompasses a change of affective atmospheres. Still, the forms of knowledge that circulate throughout these pages are not limited to the ones that are named. My hope is that the rehearsal of trauma can also bring new experiences and other names on stage.

Black Humour and the Children of the Disappeared

Introduction

In December 2010, H.I.J.O.S., the organisation created by the children of the disappeared, celebrated its 15th anniversary.¹ A big party took place at a pub in San Telmo, a historic and bohemian area of Buenos Aires. ‘Our only revenge is to be happy’, ran the invitation flyer.² Since the constitution of the group in 1995 many fundamental aspects have changed in Argentina. While in the early 1990s those responsible for the dictatorship’s crimes were free or had been ‘pardoned’, by 2010 massive trials were taking place. In 2005, the Supreme Court declared the nullity of the laws of impunity, and prosecutions were allowed once again. Since 2006 massive trials have been taking place. Today, 1424 military personnel are involved in cases across all the country.³ In this context, H.I.J.O.S. became a prosecutor in court.⁴ Although these testimonies had mostly symbolic value – the descendants were too young at the time of their parents’ kidnapping – the courts became major stages to witness the younger generation’s accounts of ongoing effects of trauma.

While attending these trials in December 2009 and January 2010, I was impressed by the affective investment of the descendants’ testimonies. These individual performances were strongly embedded in a collective spirit. I was especially moved by Paula Maroni’s words, a founder member of H.I.J.O.S. whose father was kidnapped and murdered and her mother survived after three months of captivity and torture. She stated:

¹ The name of the group, which means children in Spanish, is an acronym that combines the generational position with a strategy: ‘H.I.J.O.S. por la Igualdad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio’ (Children for Equality and Justice, against Forgetting and Silence).

² In the original: ‘La única venganza es ser felices’ (my translation).

³ This information was provided by Argentina’s Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS).

⁴ Different from the 1980s trials that condemned the Military Junta, the new series includes the figure of the *querellantes* (the plaintiffs). Thereby, the accusations are not only run by the state, but also by individuals and civil organisations, including H.I.J.O.S.. The descendants’ organisation is also prosecutor at the ABO and the ESMA case.

My childhood was sad and grey. I wasn't able to put the situation into words. In 1995 I joined H.I.J.O.S.. We still had no answers but we were happy: we were together; we could share feelings, stories, everything. The organisation saved my life.⁵

In this chapter, I wish to focus on this 'happiness'. I am interested in exploring the journey that goes from 'grey' childhoods to the sense of empowerment that the descendants acquired in H.I.J.O.S.. In fact, Maroni's testimony explicitly addresses a crucial concern of my research: the possibility that the transmission of trauma could not only imply sorrow and pain, but also delight and joy. In this respect, I seek to explore how and why the fact of being part of a collective might have allowed the emergence of non-normative pleasures coming out from the experience of loss.

This focus on pleasure contests traditional approaches; in particular, those which visualised the effects of trauma as 'paralyzing' for the descendants. For instance, in the early-1990s, Elizabeth Jelin argued that 'the experience of loss, and the veneration of the victims and their memory could become a frightening and paralyzing mechanism for the young, who have not personally lived through that experience.'⁶ By critically engaging with this perspective, I will show how the sense of humour that circulated inside H.I.J.O.S. provided the members with a new language to cope with loss. In the first section, I shall explore the continuities between the *Madres'* performance and the *escraches*, the new form of activism developed by the descendants. I will contest Diana Taylor's idea of 'DNA of performance' by showing how H.I.J.O.S. expanded the experience of mourning beyond the margins of those considered to be the 'true' victims. In the second section, I will explore how the sense of humour cultivated by the descendants sheds light on a non-normative culture of mourning. Through glimpses into rituals and ceremonies of the group, tracked via interviews and archival research, I will argue that humour provided H.I.J.O.S. with a

⁵ Maroni's testimony took place on 15 December 2009 at the Comodoro Py Tribunal. She testified as part of the so-called 'ABO' circuit that investigates human rights violations that took place at the detention centres Club Atlético, El Banco, and Olimpo. Although no official recordings are available, attendees are able to take notes. Apart from ABO, H.I.J.O.S. is also the prosecutor at the ESMA case, which tried 18 military figures accused of the disappearance, torture, and execution of 88 people in the former detention camp.

⁶ See Elizabeth Jelin, 'The Politics of Memory: The Human Rights Movements and the Construction of Democracy in Argentina', *Latin American Perspectives*, 21. 2 (1994), 38-58 (p. 52).

new platform for survival. I will discuss these arguments through a collection of episodes and scenes collected during field trips to Argentina, conducted in April and December 2009, and January and October 2010. From a historic perspective, this chapter will focus particularly upon the period from the constitution of the group in 1995 until the late-1990s when H.I.J.O.S.' *escraches* were at the heart of this history. I will also consider the challenges that emerged during the Kirchner governments, when the organisation of the descendants experienced a new turn.

Emotions and activism: just a DNA performance?

H.I.J.O.S.' activism has captured the attention of local and international scholars. Hugo Vezzetti, Susana Kaiser, Diana Taylor, and more recently Diego Venegas have presented various theoretical frameworks for approaching the children's demonstration in productive ways.⁷ Still, most of these analyses have focused on the ways in which the *escraches* embodied a new flair for the performance. Indeed, the descendants' loud and confrontational occupations of the public sphere, which denounced unpunished crimes, disturbed the emphatic but relatively quiet interventions of other groups of relatives. Drawing from these critical perspectives, I am interested in exploring further the broader combination of affects that animated the children's parades. Far from offering a spectacle of sorrow and pain, it has always intrigued me that the *escraches* displayed the intensity and the energy of a celebration.

The same as in the Madres' case, I will first take a small detour to address Taylor's accounts of H.I.J.O.S. activism, which constitutes the point of departure of my own analysis. In her famous scholarship on cultural memory in the Americas, she argues that H.I.J.O.S. developed a kind of performance that revisited their parents' struggle.⁸ This conviction appears to be related to the way in which the new generations used visual evidence in continuation with other associations of the relatives. While the *Madres* carry the ID pictures of their missing children around their necks, 'like a

⁷ See Susana Kaiser, 'Escraches: Demonstrations, communication and political memory in post-dictatorial Argentina', *Media, Culture and Society* 24 (2002), 499–516; Hugo Vezzetti 'Activismos de la memoria: el escrache', *Punto de Vista* 62 (1998), 1–7, and Diego Benegas "'If There's No Justice...': Trauma and identity in post-dictatorship Argentina', *Performance Research* 16.1 (2011), 20–30.

⁸ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 164.

second skin', the *Abuelas* ('Grandmothers') rely on DNA testing to reconstruct the lineage broken by the military. Drawing from this repertoire, Taylor argues that H.I.J.O.S.' *escraches* inverted the logic of the evidence. While using archival photos to target the perpetrators that have not been punished, the children 'quote' the *Madres*, representing themselves as the conduit of memory. In doing so, they exposed the perpetrators to heightened public awareness at a time when legal justice was not available.⁹ As much as *Madres* and *Abuelas* politicised affiliative bonds, the new generation also emphasised their identity as based on biological kinship.¹⁰ In this vein, Taylor argues that the distinctive ways in which the victims have sought to establish 'truth and lineage' were based on a chain of 'presentation and representation' where the scientific and the performative became entangled.¹¹ Ultimately, she contends that the post-dictatorship period was embedded in a biological and repetitive paradigm of public presentation based on blood: 'This representational practice of linking the scientific and performative claim is what I call the DNA of performance', she writes.¹²

Taylor's perspective is indeed provocative and theoretically challenging. Nevertheless, as already suggested while considering the *Madres*' case, her analysis stages a privatising mode of conceiving the transmission of trauma. In this sense, Taylor's understanding of the DNA of performance champions the ownership of memory in the hands of a 'wounded family' of victims. In order to contest this framework, I wish to raise different questions. For instance, I aim at exploring whether this entanglement between the scientific and the performative could have also managed to build affiliations beyond familial settings. As the aforementioned Noble Case testifies (pp. 29-30), I seek to explore how the performance of blood queries traditional forms of kinship, liberating exploratory territories that have not been fully addressed yet. By engaging with H.I.J.O.S' public and private routines, I will show how humour emerged as a strategy for displacing familial settings. This possibility has been overlooked by Taylor's approach.

A public spectacle of shame

⁹ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, p. 178.

¹⁰ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, p. 180.

¹¹ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, p. 175.

¹² Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, p. 171.

In 1997 a group of young people, almost all adolescents, stood in one of the busiest corners in the centre of Buenos Aires in front of the Mitre Hospital. It was raining heavily but the group kept on singing and jumping for hours. The target was Jorge Magnacco, the obstetrician who had been in charge of the clandestine maternity ward that operated at ESMA during the dictatorship. As had been recently proved, Magnacco assisted at the birth of at least 15 babies, who were stolen by the military or their associates. In June 2011, the obstetrician was judged as one of the main heads of a ‘Systematic Plan of Robbery of New-Born Babies’.¹³ By 1997, this criminal structure was still unexposed. After the controversial pardon granted to those already imprisoned by President Carlos Menem in 1990, the country was living through times of impunity. Magnacco was still a respected obstetrician working at the main hospital of the city. For weeks, every Friday, H.I.J.O.S. paraded from Magnacco’s place to the hospital. ‘*No bajas las escaleras, no tomes el ascensor al ladito de tu casa, está viviendo un repressor/ Don’t walk down the stairs, do not take the lift, a repressor is living next to you*’, they sang. Eventually, Magnacco resigned. The episode is now known as H.I.J.O.S.’ first *escrache*. Afterwards, the group’s techniques became more belligerent and coordinated. The demonstrations incorporated loudspeakers, music, gigantic puppets, posters, massive signals and yellow graffiti to denounce the unpunished repressors and expose their flagrant crimes in the face of the entire society. The slogan remained the same: ‘If there is no justice..., there is *escrache!*’.¹⁴ In absence of legal justice, these parades became massive, festive and mobile spectacles of public shaming.

The collective ‘coming out’ of 1990s

The queer scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests a transformative link between shame and performativity. She argues that shame can broach fresh grounds for thinking about politics: ‘Part of the interest of shame is that it is an affect that delineates identity – but delineates it without defining it or giving content. Shame, as opposed to guilt, is a bad feeling that does not attach to what one does, but to what

¹³ In the original: ‘Plan Sistemático de Robo de Bebés’ (my translation).

¹⁴ In the original: ‘Si no hay Justicia ¡hay *escrache!*’

one is.’¹⁵ Sedgwick’s perspective offers a productive displacement from an essential definition of identity (‘what one is’), to a more fluid notion of the self as being with others (‘what one does’). This framework is illuminating to consider the descendant’s activism. Moreover, as Carolyn Dinshaw argues, in Sedgwick’s work ‘shame is simultaneously contagious -thus bonding- and isolating operations are one means by which such a queer community might be formed’.¹⁶ Drawing on these combined insights, I would like to suggest that H.I.J.O.S.’ *escraches* can be perceived of as theatrical displays of shame, which enabled the descendants to progress from private experiences of rejection that they experienced during their childhoods to a collective action of public shaming redirected at the military repressors. In this sense, H.I.J.O.S.’ activism also provides us with a good case to explore how forms of injurious or hate speech can sometimes be reversed, as Butler addresses.¹⁷ I suggest that this reworking of shame was crucial to spread the militant energy beyond those directly affected by violence.

By the late-1990s the *escraches* had mythical status. Not only were the young activists involved but also neighbours who often adopted a leading role in the initiative. ‘The neighbours could realise that the old man with the nice smile who lived in the same building used to torture, rape and steal babies from the detention camps’, argued Carlos Pisoni, a member of the group.¹⁸ Andres Centrone, the DJ of the group, used to escort the parades through the city from the top of H.I.J.O.S.’ truck. He still laughed when recalling the first reactions of ‘older’ associations to the new wave of activists: ‘The *Madres* complained that our *escraches* were a *cocoliche* [pastiche].’ For the anarchist musician with no missing relatives, H.I.J.O.S.’ celebratory spirit was crucial: ‘It showed our way of doing things’, stated Centrone.¹⁹ In fact, this form of public condemnation helped to create audiences that mainly

¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.1 (1993), 1-16 (p. 12).

¹⁶ Carolyn. Dinshaw, ‘Got Medieval?’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 10. 2 (2001), 202-212 (p. 204).

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 65.

¹⁸ In the original: ‘Los vecinos se daban cuenta de que el señor de sonrisa agradable que vivía en el mismo edificio torturaba, violaba y robaba bebés de los centros de detención (my translation). From the interview conducted with Pisoni on the 17 April 2009 at a coffee store near Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. All the quotations included in this chapter belong to this interview.

¹⁹ In the original: ‘Mostraban nuestra manera de hacer cosas’ (my translation). My interview with Andrés Centrone was conducted on the 23 December 2009 at the former ESMA, where he works as guide of the public tours. All the quotations included in this chapter belong to the same talk.

exceeded those demonstrating in the streets. Visibility was crucial. Widely covered by the media, the *escraches* not only confronted the lack of justice but also the individualist logic that characterised the long decade of Carlos Menem's administrations (1989-1999), in which increasing levels of marginalization accompanied extravagant consumption by a minor wealthy sector. In her exploration of theatre and performance in post-dictatorial Argentina, Brenda Werth asserts that 'Menem's particularly authoritarian brand of neoliberalism generated unprecedented social exclusion, reflected in the emergence of the newly poor, the disenfranchised middle class, and growing popular opposition during the nineties.'²⁰ In this context, the 'Menemist' period also undermined the belief in traditional political parties, which were perceived as ineffective and corrupted by large sectors of the population. Thus, the *escraches* became a centre of attraction for many youngsters with no political involvement. By enjoining a broad net of social disadvantage, H.I.J.O.S. prepared the ground for the popular reaction that exploded during 2001's massive political, economic and social crisis. While transforming the act of shaming into a public celebration, the demonstrations conducted by the descendants worked as a confrontational and still joyful enactment of non-conventional forms of popular justice. This energy provided a more inclusive language for loss. In so doing, I would like to make the case that the *escraches* worked as a form of political 'coming out', in which an expanded society was invited to play a part. In the following pages, I will examine this experience of transmission in tune with the atmosphere that circulated inside the group.

Partners in loss

During my series of interviews with H.I.J.O.S.' members, I was surprised to notice that most of the descendants employed the language of the closet to articulate the feelings of shame that they had experienced during their childhood. Once inside the group, those abject feelings of injury regarding their burning backgrounds became reversed. In this sense, the moment of joining the group emerged as a turning point within individual biographies, a significant life event that changed the ways in which the descendants conceived their own stories and those of the others. In close contact

²⁰ Brenda Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics in Argentina* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), p. 8.

with their peers, the descendants also learned to rebuild and re-frame their relations with their missing parents in a sort of reverberation from one to the other. Most of the activists agreed on regarding their first encounters with the group as a moment of revelation and expansion. This is how Maroni addressed this moment during our interview:

Joining H.I.J.O.S. was a total ecstasy, one of the happiest moments of my life. It was euphoria. Once you were inside you got a feeling of plenitude, of having found your place in the world. Before that, I used to feel guilty and I didn't know how to deal with my own need for punishment. H.I.J.O.S. changed everything.²¹

Inside the group the descendants could deal with the exacerbated anxieties of being stigmatised as part of the shameful legacy of the military violence. During the interviews, most of the activists stressed that 'just a gaze or a smile' was enough to build a sense of companionship and solidarity between them. In tune, the first newsletter delivered by H.I.J.O.S. was entitled *La mirada* ('The Gaze'). The name clearly acknowledges the sense of mutual recognition that circulated 'beyond words'. The organisation provided its members with a new sense of belonging that eventually was acknowledged as 'the place in the world', as Maroni describes. Drawing upon their similar stories, the descendants found in H.I.J.O.S. a common ground to pass from isolated victims to partners in loss. Pisoni, a pioneer activist of the group, made a provocative association to illustrate this process:

Although it cannot be strictly compared, being a son of the disappeared worked a little bit like being an alcoholic. For someone who had to lie and hide his origin, H.I.J.O.S. initiated a new process. At the beginning you are ashamed of telling it, then when you talk about it in the group, you find someone who experienced the same and you feel relieved. Then you can start telling others your story, until you can finally say 'Hey, I am the

²¹ In the original: 'Para mí ingresar a H.I.J.O.S. fue un éxtasis total, lo recuerdo como uno de los momentos mas felices de mi vida. Era euforia. Una vez que estabas adentro tenías una sensación de plenitud, de haber encontrado tu lugar en el mundo. Antes me sentía culpable y nos sabía como lidiar con esa necesidad de castigo. H.I.J.O.S. cambió todo' (my translation). From the interview conducted with Paula Maroni on 30 December 2009 in Buenos Aires. All the quotations included in this chapter belong to this interview.

son of the disappeared'.²²

The comparison is indeed provocative. It vividly portrays how the group ultimately sponsored a transition from rejection, guilt, and denial –and various forms of public repudiation also experienced by other neglected communities- to a cherished state of public pride. Precisely, the collective environment enabled its members to rework earlier disgraceful identities as ‘sons’ and ‘daughters’, while collectively embracing the brand-new subjectivity of ‘children of the disappeared’. In this sense, I argue that the seminal feelings of self-importance and even arrogance that eventually emerged inside the group could be compared with the expansion depicted by queer biographies after the ‘coming out’. As Butler argues in a different context the coming out is never a ‘transparent revelation’.²³ Even so, H.I.J.O.S. provided its members with a ‘safe environment’ to revise their own biographies. Moreover, I suggest that, in this transition, the group ultimately emerged for each individual member as a new ‘addiction’.

The reversal of shame sponsored by the group finally conditioned its public appearance. Both processes nurtured and enhanced each other. I suggest that the empowering of the figure of the descendants propitiated by the group can be conceived of as a counter token of the collective ‘coming out’ that signified the ‘*escraches*’ to the wider society. In parallel, the social recognition of H.I.J.O.S.’ activism worked inside the organisation as a mechanism of self-assurance for each individual member. Nonetheless, despite these expansive energies, the group was also haunted by tensions and contradictions, as I will now explore.

A question of ‘pedigree’

H.I.J.O.S. was always proud of defining itself as a horizontal group with no leaders in

²² In the original: No se puede comparar estrictamente pero ser hijo de desaparecidos es un poco como el caso de un alcohólico, hay algo de seso. Para alguien que tuvo que mentir y ocultar sus orígenes, llegar a HIJOS es el comienzo de otra historia. Al principio te da vergüenza decirle, pero hay otro que dice lo mismo y sentís alivio. Después empezás a hacer pública esa historia, y al final podés decir: ¡Ey, soy hijo de desaparecidos!’ (my translation). From the interview conducted with Carlos Pisoni on 12 April 2009 in Buenos Aires. All the quotations included in this chapter belong to this interview.

²³ Judith Butler, ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 13-31 (p. 15).

which all decisions were voted in assembly. Nonetheless, there were many distinctions inside. Initially, to be a part of the group all members had to be either the son or daughter of a murdered, disappeared, formerly arrested or exiled person. This was in fact established by H.I.J.O.S.' first national meeting, which took place in 1996 in Córdoba city. In this sense, to be part of the group each candidate had to bear the condition of the 'victim'. As I could notice during my fieldwork, unspoken distinctions and status cut across the group. These hierarchies were mostly related to the extent to which each member had been affected by state violence. Disappeared or exiled parents did not qualify as the same. Similarly, a member who had one parent disappeared qualified differently than another who had both. These differential levels of infliction installed a regime of ranks inside the group. Indeed, the more one was affected by violence, the more 'privileged' their status was within the organisation. Personal status tended to increase in the cases of well known disappeared parents. In addition, those who had many relatives disappeared were known as the ones who had *sangre azul* ('blue blood'). They were also 'VIP' members of the group. These hierarchies were acknowledged by the organisation's slang: they called it 'a question of *pedigree*'.

The discovery of this internal slang acted as a revealing moment of my fieldwork. It enabled me to grasp an ubiquitous code, which dramatically defined blood in connection to loss. It made me aware that the reverberations of the traumatic past had created a hierarchy of lineage inside the group, which was mischievously presented as a version of royal 'blue' stock. This is how Pisoni, who lost both parents during the dictatorship, addressed this issue during our interview:

When we were kids we were ashamed to say that we were children of the disappeared. Now we are not afraid anymore. We are not ashamed to say who we are. Among us, we call each other 'orphans'. I like the idea of the 'orphans' but only if it is one of us speaking. I don't like people who make jokes who are not real descendants. There is the 'pedigree'.²⁴

²⁴ In the original: 'Cuando éramos chicos nos daba vergüenza decir que éramos hijos de desaparecidos. Ahora no tenemos miedo de decirlo, no tenemos vergüenza de quién somos. Entre nosotros nos llamamos los 'huérfanos'. Me gusta la idea, pero solo si es alguno de nosotros. No me gustan lo que hacen chistes y no son hijos. Ahí está el pedigree' (my translation).

If there was a time when the descendants were afraid of confessing their condition, under the protection of the group the status of the victim qualified as a plus. As Pisoni argued, the 'pedigree' primarily worked as a contestation of the experience of individual shame on the part of the descendants. While assuming their condition of 'orphans', the activists contested the repression and disavowal that marked the first years of democracy when the entire society was obliged to face the effects of violence. In reversing that experience of shame, the organisation established an inverse hierarchy. This vernacular slang can be formulated in a straightforward way: 'the more tragic, the better'. As I will examine further, the group's reinvestment of the experience of loss was processed through a dark sense of humour that permeated the organisation.

Still, the question of pedigree stages a controversial ambivalence in relation to one of the main questions of my research, that of expanding the possibilities for sharing trauma beyond bloodline configurations. If at a public level H.I.J.O.S.' *escraches* contested the bloodline and self-contained forms of activism developed by other relatives, in a tacit manner the internal slang that circulated inside the group iterated the 'monopoly of memory, loss and pain', which, as Jelin addresses, was constituted on the part of the victims.²⁵ However, at the same time, these distinctions were also processed through humour. Indeed, Pisoni's description of the 'pedigree', seems to point towards an unwritten rule that says that it is neither sensitive nor desirable to make jokes in relation to delicate issues, unless one had experienced a similar situation. If this tacit norm had the putative aim of preventing sensitive issues from being trivialised, it also established limits and rights, which ultimately defined those who were endorsed with the privilege of laughter. In these terms, the ones entitled to make jokes about the inured condition of the members were those who had pedigree: the true 'orphans'. As becomes clear from Pisoni's words, the descendants were somehow aware that a mischievous performance of blood was taking place within the group. In fact, the pedigree also worked as a self-reflective logic of auto-promotion, which reflected the feeling of superiority that circulated among those who shared the 'blue' blood. In fact, the DJ Centrone, with no 'disappeared' within his family, perceived these tensions when he first came to the group:

²⁵Jelin, 'The Politics of Memory', p. 53.

The one who received me was Rodolfo Walsh's grandson, one of my best friends now.²⁶ He asked me who my parents were and when I told him he started looking at me with distrust. 'Which party are you from?', he asked. I said that I was anarchist and they still laugh at me because of that. But what was the point? Did you need to have your old man killed to have the right to take part?²⁷

For many years, Centrone was the exception, the only member of H.I.J.O.S. who had no direct victims within his family. Nonetheless, from 1999 onwards, H.I.J.O.S. acknowledged that wider forms of support were required in order to legitimise their claims. After heated debates, the organisation decided to accept the 'open population', as they called those who had not been directly affected by violence. A new period began.

A new family in mourning

The decision to welcome the 'open population' was crucial. For the first time, an organisation of the relatives accepted the possibility of 'sharing' in the trauma. In H.I.J.O.S.' case, the construction of a new lineage of non-kin activists contributed to displace the idea that the dictatorship only resulted in direct victims. While welcoming the 'open population' into their ranks, H.I.J.O.S. contributed to a conception of loss as collective. This form of non-kin activism brought a new political impulse in the aftermath of violence. Nonetheless, this decision also led to an internal split. While some members left the organisation to create a new section, inside the original group tensions became visible. A new membership was born. There were members who had pedigree, and those who lacked pedigree.

It is my argument that H.I.J.O.S. provided its members with an affective life-world

²⁶ Rodolfo Walsh was a renowned journalist killed by the military on 25 March 1977. He was ambushed one day after denouncing the criminal acts of the military through his famous *Carta abierta a la Junta Militar* ('Open Letter to the Junta').

²⁷ In the original: 'El que me recibió fue el nieto de Rodolfo Walsh, uno de mis mejores amigos ahora. Me preguntó quienes eran mis Viejos y cuando le dije me empezó a mirar con sospecha. "De qué partido venís", me preguntó. Le dije que era anarquista y todavía se ríen por eso. ¿Pero cuál es el punto? ¿Te tienen que haber matado a mi Viejo para poder entrar?' (my translation).

that could be conceived in terms of a political family. In fact, the group brought together spaces of friendship and kinship that are usually considered separately. Being part not only implied entering into a new circuit of political activities, including demonstrations and public assemblies, but also parties, camping, journeys, and a whole network in which friendship, sex, and political discussion were usually knotted. Ultimately, these affective ties drew upon an alternative pattern of social belonging that may be read in tune with Eng's expanded notion of kinship, which addresses not only 'collective, communal, and consensual affiliations' but also 'the physic, affective, and visceral bonds.'²⁸ In fact, those 'visceral bonds' depict well the tensions and also the strong sense of communality involved in H.I.J.O.S.' practices. This was especially visible during the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the military siege in 1996 when the descendants had the feeling that the whole society was looking at them. This is how Maroni evoked that period:

We went to all the events together. We were 18 and the only priority was being together. We could be all day at someone's place, laughing, eating, or sleeping. The idea was to have all the time for us. That was what it was all about.²⁹

Fifteen years later, those early times are known as H.I.J.O.S.' 'gold years'. Expelled from conventional structures of kinship, the descendants recreated alternative ties of social belonging. 'We became a sort of family', said Nina Ruiz who had lost neither parent and who is now in charge of group communications.³⁰ The sense of intimacy was so intense that those who were not part of the organisation were called */chonga* ['outsiders']. The term *chongo* has been traditionally used within the Argentine gay-lesbian-trans communities to refer to outside sexual partners who commonly do not identify themselves as gay. The incorporation of queer sexual slang into H.I.J.O.S.' jargon also reveals a productive wide-ranging imbrications of spheres in which the specific critical and political force of the term, derived from its origins in sexual

²⁸ See Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, p. 2.

²⁹ In the original: 'Ibamos a todos lados juntos. Teníamos 18 y la única prioridad era estar juntos. Podíamos estar todo el día en la casa de alguien, riéndonos, comiendo o durmiendo. La idea era tener todo el tiempo para nosotros. De eso se trataba' (my translation).

³⁰ In the original: 'Empezamos a ser como una familia' (my translation). My interview with Nina Ruiz was conducted on 23 April 2009 at *Familiares*, the office that H.I.J.O.S. shared by that time with the association of the relatives, in Buenos Aires.

minorities' struggles, becomes transferred to a new form of memory activism.³¹ Inside H.I.J.O.S. a new form of support and care was constituted. To some extent, kinship was remade into a 'family of choice', one which tended to be perceived as progressively exclusive. In fact, within the group dating people from the 'outside' was considered as a betrayal. 'Mixed couples hardly survived', was the prevailing rumour. 'I was dating a guy who had no relatives disappeared and eventually I left him. An *outside* boyfriend simply didn't fit', confirmed Maroni. I would like to read this logic of inside/outside alongside the particular sense of humour that circulated within the group.

A dark sense of the comical

While interviewing H.I.J.O.S.' members, I was surprised by the use of humour, especially a dark sense of humour that the descendants applied to recall painful experiences. It was not regular humour but a particular spirit of the comical, a mix of affects always flirting with death. Eventually, I discovered that this appeal to the tragic worked as a sort of viscous substance through which non-normative feelings of kinship resonated among the members. Something that could not be perceived as comical taken in isolation, functioned within the group as a form of recovering memory and also as the reversal of previous experiences of injury. This is how Maroni justified the mood of the group:

I cannot laugh about the same things with friends that did not experience the same. They could not understand it. Even for myself it was uncomfortable, a sort of internal doubt 'you cannot be laughing at this'. But with someone who suffered the same, there is a feeling of complicity that you cannot have with anyone else.³²

As it becomes clear, this non-normative sense of humour was animated by a restrictive idea of 'us', which encouraged certain feelings of possession and

³¹ Thanks to my examiner Jens Andermann for pointing out this productive connection during the viva.

³² In the original: 'No me puedo reír de las mismas cosas con amigos que no pasaron por lo mismo. No lo entenderían. Incluso para mí es un poco incómodo, como una duda interna 'no podés estar riendote de esto'. Pero con alguien que sufrió lo mismo que vos, hay una complicidad que no tenés con nadie más' (my translation).

exclusivity among those who shared in trauma. In this sense, humour created an internal logic of privilege. This profound sense of complicity was nevertheless accompanied by guilt. ‘We shouldn’t be laughing at this’, was the remorseful thought. To some extent, humour emerged as a confirmation of the pedigree. Once again, the comical spirit addressed a key tension within the descendants concerning the feelings of ownership in relation to loss. While activism expanded the experience of trauma throughout wider sectors of civic society, at a more intimate level the ‘injury card’ was reinforced. ‘Because we suffered, we are entitled to laugh’ was the unspoken code that circulated within the group. In this respect, Sigmund Freud argues that there is a sense of superiority and invincibility attached to humour: ‘If it is really the super-ego which, in humour, speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego, this will teach us that we have still a great deal to learn about the nature of the super ego.’³³ Drawing on this, I suggest that humour provided the descendants’ ‘intimidated egos’ with a form of comfort. Humour enabled them to mourn their missing parents through the reverberating properties of joy, which they associated to activist practices. It is worth exploring further on this argument.

Flirting with death

At some point in my fieldwork, I became especially curious about the particular kind of jokes that made the descendants laugh. Nonetheless, the resistance of my interviewees to going into detail was palpable. ‘It is difficult to remember those jokes now. During these first years this humour was there all the time. It was a mood of being in the group’, argued Lucila Quieto, a former activist.³⁴ Still, I progressively noticed that most of the jests that circulated within the group drew from the same kind of impulse. A member of the group gave me a priceless clue to explore this: ‘We always joke about death. Our jokes are always related to the experience of not having your loved ones next to us, and we play with this all the time’, Pisoni told me.³⁵

³³ Sigmund Freud, ‘Humour’ in *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI (1927-1931), trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), pp. 159-166 (p. 166).

³⁴ In the original ‘Es difícil de acordarse de esos chistes ahora. Durante los primeros años ese humor estaba presente todo el tiempo. Era el modo de estar en el grupo’ (my translation).

³⁵ In the original: ‘Siempre hacemos chistes en relación a la muerte. Los chistes están siempre relacionados a no tener a nuestros seres queridos con nosotros, jugamos con eso todo el tiempo’ (my translation).

Simply and powerfully, humour coped with death.

In this sense, it was revealing to find out that jokes were especially popular during birthdays or family celebrations in which the parental absence became unavoidable. For instance, it was an internal agreement that the best place to celebrate Fathers' or Mothers' days was next to the Rio de la Plata, where most of the disappeared were thrown alive. Moreover, the activists used to play with the idea that a green Falcon, the emblematic cars that were used to conduct the kidnappings during the dictatorship, might kidnap them. More than just flirting with death, I thought that what was finally at stake in such dark jokes was the fantasy of repeating their parents' stories. Indeed, both Jelin and Hirsch refer to this as a problem involved in the transmission of traumatic memory, the fear that the descendants may have their 'own stories and experiences displaced and even evacuated by those of a previous generation.'³⁶ As I will address later in this chapter, among some members this fantasy reached difficult extremes. Nonetheless, in most of the cases, the descendants appeared to reverse these fears through laughter.

In order to address this process further, I would like to consider Henri Bergson's important work on laughter. Bergson argues that we should not imprison the comic spirit with a definition but rather try to understand it in its natural environment, the specific community in which it arises.³⁷ Bearing this consideration in mind, I argue that humour worked in H.I.J.O.S. as a way of coping with the everyday effects of trauma, enabling the descendants to make sense of the difficulties involved in the reconstruction of parental figures. During our interview, Maroni offered a gripping example to illustrate this. She told me the story of an activist whose entire family, including his father, mother and siblings had been kidnapped. 'He used to say that even his dog was made to disappear. We could not stop laughing because of the pathetic tone that he put in that phrase. This guy was a VIP member of the group', said Maroni.³⁸ I suggest that the impish idea of 'VIP member' powerfully captures the appeal to the tragic that permeated the organisation. The self-deprecating gesture of the activist can also be read alongside Freud's insight. The psychoanalyst observes

³⁶ Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', p. 107, and Jelin, 'The Politics of Memory', p. 52.

³⁷ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Manor, 2008), p. 10.

³⁸ In the original: 'Solía decir que se le habían llevado hasta el perro. No podíamos parar de reírnos del patetismo de esa frase. El pibe era un activista VIP del grupo' (my translation).

that one of the most common forms of humour takes place when an individual adopts a humorous attitude to make himself the object of amusement for the others. In those cases, the non-participant or listener is also affected.³⁹ As the episode illustrates, this form of self-reflective humour played a fundamental role in H.I.J.O.S.. It produced the atmosphere in which the yield of pleasure fell back on the entire group. In this sense, the humorous attitude did not belong to a single person but to the group itself. Drawing on this, I would like to consider further the sense of commonality that Bergson relates to humour: ‘Our laughter is always the laughter of a group’, he writes.⁴⁰ Indeed, H.I.J.O.S. offers a particularly eloquent case to explore this. Since most of the members of the group had gone through similar experiences, to some extent their experiences became interchangeable. On these grounds, pleasure became expansive and expandable. The effects were intensified. This closed and enclosing mechanism not only reinforced the high levels of self-reference in the group but also infused its feelings of superiority.

With these ideas in mind, I would like to rethink the case of the member of the group who used to joke about his dismembered genealogical tree. I suggest that this activist performed a self-deprecating act of victimisation through which he deliberately assumed the injury card to amuse the others. He showed off his condition of victim. This liturgy was already known among other associations of the relatives; nonetheless, in H.I.J.O.S. this script was displaced and re-empowered by laughter. To some extent, the descendants revisited the figure of the ‘wretch’, through which Sara Ahmed describes those miserable or unfortunate individuals who are perceived ‘as lacking what causes happiness’.⁴¹ Nonetheless, H.I.J.O.S. drew from the rhetoric of this unfortunate lineage to transform it into a source of collective amusement. In so doing, the group proposed a subversive parody of traditional forms of unhappiness. The descendants managed to convert those who seem to lack everything to the ‘king’ of the victims; and thereby VIP members of the group. As Bergson reminds us, humour always requires a collective environment capable of reading a particular tone as a joke. In H.I.J.O.S. this collective environment drew upon a common loss. It provided the common atmosphere capable of identifying the depreciatory style as

³⁹ Freud, ‘Humour’, p.161.

⁴⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 11.

⁴¹ Sara Ahmed, ‘Happiness and Queer Politics’, *World Picture* 3, (2009), p.12
<http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/> [accessed 1 December 2011]

amusing, and even transformative. In some oblique way, I suggest, humour also worked as a peculiar form of community elitism among the descendants. It pivoted on loss and blood. Only in this manner, the deprived condition of the ‘wretch’ could be promoted as a plus. Ultimately, this fooling, bitter style became the frame through which the group perceived the world and developed its ability to laugh about it.

The long laughter of the wretch

During H.I.J.O.S’ 15-year trajectory, humour worked as a collective tool to deal with various political contexts. From 1994 the democratic governments began offering ‘financial compensations’ to the relatives of the missing. In this context, the associations of the relatives responded differently. While one of the factions of the *Madres* rejected the official funds, most of the other groups accepted them, including H.I.J.O.S.⁴² Pisoni explained:

Even in the cases in which this money went to support an anarchist fanzine, we thought that it was better to take it. It was a sign of responsibility from the state. It wouldn’t change our fight.⁴³

Even so, the situation of being the recipients of those ‘reparative funds’ engendered certain feelings of embarrassment and discomfort among the descendants, which eventually became the source of new jokes.⁴⁴ For instance, while crafting a flag for a demonstration, an activist could say: ‘Dad, please, do not appear now because I will not get the reimbursement.’⁴⁵ Or in the cases of members with both parents disappeared, it was possible to hear: ‘Oh dude, you are so lucky, you are going to get double.’⁴⁶ Other jests also addressed the uses of that official money. If someone turned up with a new car, aspersions could cast: ‘Look...! He is driving his dad’s

⁴² In a public act at Plaza de Mayo, Hebe de Bonafini said that the relatives were offered between US\$90 and US\$250,000 per disappeared and complained against setting prices on their children’s lives. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38fXKYQXB9I&feature=share> [accessed 5 June 2010]. See Chapter 3, p. 108 for further analysis.

⁴³ In the original: ‘Incluso si la plata se usaba para pagar un fanzine anarquista nos pareció mejor aceptarla. Era una señal de responsabilidad de parte del estado. No cambiaba nuestra lucha’ (my translation).

⁴⁴ As I will explore in Chapter 5, the uneasy feeling in relation to reparative funds are also addressed by the wild humour that informs Félix Bruzzone’s novella, *Los topos* (p. 163).

⁴⁵ In the original: ‘Viejo, no aparezcas ahora que no cobro la indemnización’ (my translation).

⁴⁶ In the original: ‘Chabón, que culo, vos cobrás doble’ (my translation).

arm.’⁴⁷ Conversely, if a member started dressing more expensively, he or she would be intimidated without compassion: ‘There you have your mum’s nail.’⁴⁸ Although this humorous attitude became part of the logic of the group, some activists felt uncomfortable talking about it a decade later. In some cases, I had the feeling that they were protecting something private, only verbalized within the slang of the group; a guilty pleasure that only those with *pedigree* could share. Even so, other activists eventually dared to explicitly advocate this kind of humour. Pisoni argued:

I know that many people didn’t like this kind of joke. But for me it was clear: one can cry for the dead or remember them in a playful way. We couldn’t spend our whole life crying.⁴⁹

One can either cry or laugh: the activist’s response was certainly provocative. It reminded me of the kind of argument that Jacques Derrida raises in *The Work of Mourning*, in which he writes: ‘the affirmation of life is nothing other than a certain thought of death; it is neither opposition nor indifference to death.’⁵⁰ For Derrida, the moment of laughter is often done in the most difficult moments of mourning; hilarity comes as an affirmation, a protestation in the name of life, almost as a triumph over death.⁵¹ I suggest that similar contested affects circulated inside H.I.J.O.S.. A further example can give a better sense of this.

Daniel Shapira was born at ESMA. After his parents’ kidnapping, he was returned to the grandmother who raised him. During the Kirchnerist period, a memorial dedicated to his father was placed near Daniel’s workplace. Since he had almost no pictures of his father, he likes joking that at least he now has a memorial to pose with. When it rains, he teases: ‘I am going to hang out a little bit with my dad. The poor guy is getting wet outside.’⁵² The case is again illustrative of a classic operation that Freud

⁴⁷ In the original: ‘Miren, está manejando el brazo del Viejo’ (my translation).

⁴⁸ In the original: ‘Esa es la uña de tu mamá’ (my translation).

⁴⁹ In the original: ‘A mucha gente no le gustaba este tipo de chistes. Para mí era claro: o llorás por los muertos o los recordás con alegría. No podíamos pasarnos toda la vida llorando’ (my translation).

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 175.

⁵¹ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 183.

⁵² In the original: ‘Me voy a ver un rato a mi viejo. El pobre tipo se está empapando afuera’ (my translation). The case was addressed in an article entitled ‘La risa y la libertad’ (‘Laughter and Freedom’) published in the youth supplement *Ni a palos*, 2 August 2009, <http://www.niapalos.org/?s=Daniel+Shapira&submit.x=0&submit.y=0> [accessed 10 December 2011].

identifies in humour. When the activist assumes this humorous attitude in relation to his father's death, he refuses 'to be distressed by the provocation of reality, and presents himself beyond vulnerability.'⁵³ In so doing, he not only denies being affected by the external world, but he also pretends that such trauma can be a source of pleasure. For Freud, this displacement is an essential element of humour, and a subtle form of 'dignity'.⁵⁴ Moreover, Freud argues that 'humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle.'⁵⁵ At the same time, he suggest that the unstable borders of humour may also address the loss of a certain sense of reality, something that in Freud's reading emphasises the invincibility of the ego over the real world.⁵⁶

It seems to me that H.I.J.O.S. introduced an enhancement within this mechanism. It was not an individual sense of reality that was at stake but a collective spirit from which the source of pleasure eventually emerged. Precisely this amalgam of vibrations explains how the descendants managed to work through the process of grief as a group. In this way, humour appeared as an operation of 'countersignature', a way of reversing the parental absence while making a new place in the present. As Derrida argues, the process of countersignature always implies adding something new. Thus, humour did not work for H.I.J.O.S. as a simple distraction, but rather as 'a movement to survive, to live on', to borrow Derrida's words again.⁵⁷ This appeal to laughter enabled the descendants to move into an experience of survival in which the very idea of vulnerability and loss turned out to be empowered. In this sense, H.I.J.O.S' flirtation with death also inaugurated a new stage in the process of mourning. This differential capacity to produce joy from loss counts as H.I.J.O.S.' main triumph. Dark humour was the gift, the rebellious attitude that finally 'saved' its members from loss.

The dark side of laughter

As I came to know later, some of my interviewees mentioned the main arguments of this chapter to editors of the magazine, inspiring the above-mentioned production.

⁵³ Freud, 'Humour', p. 162.

⁵⁴ Freud, 'Humour', p. 162.

⁵⁵ Freud, 'Humour', p. 163.

⁵⁶ Freud, 'Humour', p. 162.

⁵⁷ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 176.

Nevertheless, I would like to examine how this collective sense of humour, at some stages, also compromised certain sense of reality. I will argue that this process was mostly related to the over-identification with the paternal figures. To address this point, I need to go back to the atmosphere that circulated within the group within those mythical early years. As already suggested, H.I.J.O.S. imposed a turning point regarding how to recall the missing parents. While most of the associations of the relatives had mostly ignored or denied the political activism of the ‘disappeared’, the descendants vindicated the parental militancy and at some point they even tried to re-enact it. These ritualistic practices reached such a passionate extreme that they also brought new anxieties and contradictions within the group.

Given that many youngsters arrived to H.I.J.O.S. without knowing about their parental militancy, the group became a space in which to lose inhibitions. In the weekly assemblies, the candidates learned to link their names to those of their parents, identifying the places and circumstances of their kidnapping. In this context, H.I.J.O.S. sponsored what was acknowledged as a ‘critical revision’ of the parental activism. Ironically, the process led most of the descendants to adopt their parents’ affiliations. In fact, by the end of the 1990s, two main factions could be recognised inside the group: the *Montoneros*, which identified with Peronism, and the left-wing *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), identified with a communist background. In some extemporaneous way, H.I.J.O.S. tended to reproduce the main divisions that informed the guerrilla movement during the 1970s. I shall provide an example to illustrate this.

During the national meeting in 1996, it was possible to witness two bands of young activists engaging for hours in a ‘war of songs’ against each other. Ostensibly, the songs were the same as those chanted by their parents during the clandestine period. This over-identification with the parental stories could be read in tune with Taylor’s argument that H.I.J.O.S. was irremediably captured by the past. Nonetheless, I suggest that the scene was also embedded in a strange temporality that exceeds the mere logic of the ‘quote’. Although there is something profoundly anachronistic, and maybe also childish, in the portrait of the descendants fierily chanting those militant songs, I suggest that the old lyrics also emerged as the affective surface through which the new generation made contact with the missing. In this sense, I argue that

the rehearsal of the parental ‘script’ embodied by those songs also worked as a form of affective reparation in the present. In this respect, Patrick Duggan’s and Mick Wallis’ analysis of trauma and performance offer a productive framework to consider how the rehearsal of traumatic event may also have restorative efficacy.⁵⁸ Drawing on this, I suggest that the repetition of those old lyrics enabled the descendants to connect with the intensities that were part of their parents’ lives. In so doing, they found a way to mourn their absences through a common investment in activism. For the descendants, grief became possible through the sense of friendship and complicities gained through activism. Despite the internal differences, the feeling of being part of a collective had also the capacity to liberate a surplus of pleasure, mostly associated to certain practices in which the descendants felt closely identified with their parents’ practices. The excess involved in those songs was not related to their revolutionary slogans, but rather to the possibility of making them work as surface of enjoyment.⁵⁹ The process also reminds me of the importance of pleasure as a political factor as addressed by Carrie Hamilton, and also how non-normative forms of grieving can draw upon the memories of happiness associated with activism.⁶⁰ While re-working a common loss, the group created a new space of enchantment. During the Menemist period in which oblivion or denial were the ordinary, the ‘war of songs’ staged a renewed possibility of communality. It finally built a sense of being together across times.

Nonetheless, the vindication of the parental activism was also a source of new anxieties. By the late 1990s, the descendants were convinced that they had achieved a successful model of activism. For this reason, they also feared that traditional left-wing parties might try to ‘occupy’ the organisation. The perception of this ‘external threat’ influenced discussions around the opening of the group to the ‘open population’. It also mobilised distinctive modes of security, which to some extent tended to mimic the strategies that were undertaken by the guerrilla groups during the 1970s. For instance, some ‘hard-core’ members started using ‘war names’ and

⁵⁸ Patrick Duggan and Mick Wallis, ‘Trauma and Performance: Maps, Narratives and Folds’, *Performance Research*, 16.1 (2011), 4-16 (p. 6).

⁵⁹ I will explore further the process of identification with the parental past as a cross-dressing experience during my analysis of *Mi vida después* in Chapter 4.

⁶⁰ Carrie Hamilton, ‘Activist Memories: The Politics of Trauma and the Pleasure of Politics’, in *The Future of Memory*, ed. by Richard Crownshaw, Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), pp. 265-278 (p. 271).

keeping diaries with fake contacts to protect the security of the group. H.I.J.O.S.’ assemblies, which were considered as the supreme stage of decision-making of the group, began to have limited access. As many of my interviewees commented, all candidates who wanted to be part of these meetings (even those who bore the ‘pedigree’) had to go through a series of mandatory ‘reception dinners’, which included food and wine, plus specific ‘training’ and formal declarations about the reasons for joining the group.

As most of the activists now agree, those security measures were probably overestimated. The displacement between the younger generation’s activism and previous clandestine forms of militancy also contributed to set an outdated agenda within H.I.J.O.S.’ political horizons. Eventually, the over-identification with the parental figures also brought desertions. Ricardo Dios, who spent a short period within the group in 1996, referred to this:

By that time, there was an idealization of the guerrilla groups and their commitments, loves and passions. There was a lot of confusion about what it meant to be an activist during the 1970s and what we were doing during the 1990s. The fantasy of becoming our parents pushed me away.⁶¹

In some minor cases, the ubiquitous sense of identification and transference that circulated in the group achieved the extreme fantasy of taking the place of the missing, and eventually becoming those vanished figures. This is how one of my interviewees described those tortuous and disturbing feelings:

I couldn’t sleep at night. Each time I went to bed, I thought that they would come to take me. I was terrorized. I started acting a story that was not mine.⁶²

Among the literature that addresses the emotional intensities associated with street

⁶¹ In the original: ‘Por esa época había una idealización de los grupos armados, de los compromisos que tenían, sus amores y pasiones. Había mucha confusión sobre lo que significaba ser activista en los 1970s y lo que nosotros estábamos haciendo. La fantasía de pensar que éramos nuestros viejos me terminó alejando’ (my translation).

⁶² In the original: ‘No podía dormir de noche. Cada vez que me iba a la cama, sentía que me iban a venir a buscar. Estaba aterrada. Empecé a actuar una historia que no era mía’ (my translation).

activism and direct action, obscure occupations such as the fantasies of persecution described by this activist have not been enough explored.⁶³ Although my analysis is far from being exhaustive, I would like to suggest that the woman's over-identification with her mother's story can be read as the dark side of the vindication of the parental activism, and also form of 'evacuation' of the younger generation's own experiences. As the testimony of the activist reveals, these disturbing fantasies risked a faulty appraisal of reality. Her case also sheds light on disturbing contradictions inscribed in H.I.J.O.S.' activism, which remained mostly silenced even within the members of the group. These conflicts have not been exhausted. Moreover, they could be grasped as the counter-effect of the humorous mood developed in the group during those mythical early years. Even so, the strong 'coalition' constituted by the descendants with their missing parents also reinforces a strange form of conviviality across time.

Communities across time

I would like to address this form of conviviality between parents and offspring through an artistic initiative that was hosted by H.I.J.O.S. by the late 1990s. Between 1998 and 2000, Lucila Quieto developed a photographic experiment to portray the activists posing next to their missing parents. 'You can have the picture you always wanted', was the pitch posted on the walls of the office that by that time the group had in the area of Constitución in Buenos Aires. Responding to Quieto's instruction, the volunteers brought the favourite picture of their parents to the shooting session. There, the mostly old black-and-white images were amplified and transformed into gigantic slides, which were projected onto a big screen. Using these slides as tantalising curtains, Quieto portrayed both generations together. The effect is as spectral as it is uncanny: they are scenes of impossible reunion in which parents and offspring inhabited the edgy temporality of the would-have-been. Sometimes, the youngsters are the ones who hug, toast or dance with their progenitors. Sometimes, it feels as if it were the other way around: it is the missing who come back to comfort their already grown-up offspring, to hold them or even to propose a toast across time (see figure 1,

⁶³ Ann Cvetkovich's analysis of lesbian activism and Carrie Hamilton's reflections on political excitement and merriment as a hidden form of mourning open productive grounds to explore this question further. See A. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, p. 187 and C. Hamilton, 'Activist Memories: The Politics of Trauma and the Pleasure of Politics', p. 171.

p. 211). In some poignant cases, the youngest look older than their parents. They even glance suspiciously at each other, as they cannot finally arrive at an agreement.

I would like to suggest that Quieto's photographic series stands as the testimony of a struggle, another ghostly war in which the young generations tried to find their own space in the present. Still, the playful mood that permeated that struggle was difficult to grasp by those who were not familiar with the spirit of the group. In this respect, Quieto argued during our interview:

Many people felt sorry for me and usually said, 'I can imagine how painful and terrible this process must have been for you'. But for me it was exactly the opposite; I had a lot of fun!⁶⁴

In fact, I would like to suggest that those pictures were part of the descendants' everyday lives during the early period of the group. They suggest a strange sense of temporality, which the work of the medieval feminist scholar Carolyn Dinshaw enables me to address further. In her research on pre- and post- modern archives and sexualities, Dinshaw notices that 'a concept of queer relations across time recognizes the past, including the *distant* past, as a vibrant and heterogeneous resource for self-fashioning as well as community building.'⁶⁵ In a parallel way, I argue that also for the descendants of Argentina's experience of violence, the *recent* past also emerges as a vibrant source of encounter. Precisely, in this expanded sense of time, as Dinshaw well addresses, 'the dead may indeed come alive -some part, some aspect of them- as we touch and animate them in our own lives.'⁶⁶ It seems to me that the impossible scenes of reunion portrayed by Quieto speak about this possibility. Moreover, they give actual shape and *materialise* a self-created community across time. In this sense, Quieto's photographic essay shows how the shared feelings in relation to the missing parents moved across conventional borders generating a new sense of belonging in the here and now.

⁶⁴ In the original: 'A mucha gente le daba lástima. "Me imagino qué doloroso y terrible debe haber sido este proceso para vos", me decían. Pero para mí fue todo lo contrario ¡Me divertí un montón! Estas fotos eran parte de nuestra vida cotidiana' (my translation). From the interview conducted with Lucila Quieto on 23 April 2009 at the former ESMA.

⁶⁵ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 142.

⁶⁶ Dinshaw, 'Got Medieval?', p. 211.

In 2001, Quieto's images were part of an art exhibition in Italy and also of a catalogue.⁶⁷ More recently, they have been transformed into a book, *Arqueología de la ausencia* ('Archaeology of Absence').⁶⁸ In this way, more than a decade later, Quieto's series of impossible encounters haunts the present with a pervasive demand for justice. This demand is not satisfied within the ongoing trials.⁶⁹ To some extent, those unattainable ceremonies of reunion show how the missing figures reject being archived. They come back once and again inviting to explore ways in which communities are constituted through affective touches with the past.

On 27 June 2011, H.I.J.O.S. inaugurated a new office at ESMA former detention camp. They called it '*La casa de la militancia*' ('The House of Activism'). The brand new headquarters are located in a vast space that used to be the military gym during the dictatorship. As disturbing as it sounds, this re-occupation of the navy school can be perceived as another form of justice, a form of affective reparation that allows the descendants to countersign their own ghosts across time.⁷⁰

The legacies of humour

In this chapter I have attempted to explore a key tension; whether the humorous mood that accompanied H.I.J.O.S. worked as an effective tool to move away from claims of victimisation. The answer is not simple. Without doubt, H.I.J.O.S.' flirtation with death inaugurated a new phase in the national scene of mourning. The group worked as a laboratory for the emergence of slang and rituals that challenged the codes of other relatives' associations. The participatory and expansive mood inaugurated by the *escraches* helped to establish a public culture of mourning in which the whole society was invited to take part. At an internal level, H.I.J.O.S. worked as a space of

⁶⁷ In a recent interview, Quieto commented that the Italian mentor 'offered himself as a sponsor and ended up being a thief'. See Mariana Enriquez, 'Reencuentros', *Página/12*, 18 December 2011, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-7565-2011-12-19.html> [accessed 22 December 2011]

⁶⁸ Lucila Quieto, *Arqueología de la Ausencia. Ensayo Fotográfico* (Buenos Aires: Casa Nova, 2011).

⁶⁹ I am indebted to Vikki Bell's analysis of Fernando Brodsky's picture to build this argument. See Bell, 'On Fernando's Photograph. The Biopolitics of *Aparición* in Contemporary Argentina', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27.4 (2010), 69-89.

⁷⁰ I will explore further the re-occupation of ESMA during the analysis of the cooking lessons in Chapter 3.

encounter for injured peers, which eventually became a ‘family of choice’. Inside the group, the descendants found a common ground of complicity to share in pain but also in fun and love. This singular mix of death and laughter delineated a new experience of survival in which vulnerability and loss turned out to be empowering. To some extent, humour was H.I.J.O.S.’ biggest rebellion. It built a non-normative position to resist violence while reinventing a politics of grieving for a whole generation. Indeed, this was a collective triumph, which secured the dignity of the members. While making fun of their wretched condition, H.I.J.O.S. fought for a new space in the present. In this sense, humour worked as a tool for social transformation, providing its members with ‘a site of both individual and collective repair’, to use Eng’s words.⁷¹ Perhaps the main achievement was to adopt this attitude as a collective, rendering the yield of pleasure an object of exchange for all the members. More broadly, humour also provided H.I.J.O.S. with a form of collective consolation to deal with parental absences. It empowered a generation of victims to defy the legacy and reinterpret ‘the transmitted experiences in terms of their own historical circumstances.’⁷² Humour worked as a mode of survival, a way of life.

Nonetheless, as has also been addressed here, the paradoxes and tensions among the group remained present. To some extent, humour contributed to cause stress. The fooling dark style also brought a sense of superiority among the members of the group, who mostly refused to be defeated by their traumas. Oblique forms of arrogance also addressed the aspiration of mastering the ownership of trauma. Expressions like ‘pedigree’ and ‘blue blood’, despite being embedded in a playful mood, also maintained the victim status. If this humorous attitude succeeded in introducing a novel shift in the spectrum of affects that governed the relatives’ discourse, this style also showed its limits. In fact, H.I.J.O.S. never stopped oscillating from one pole to another. The generational complicity also contributed to give the group the character of a sect that might not have helped their members to move forward. After all, the very category of H.I.J.O.S. tended to position the group in an endless childhood. Not only does it point towards a kinship tie and a highlighted performance of blood, but also towards an impossible emotional state, which stages the fantasy of being forever young. To some extent, the activists began to regard

⁷¹ Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, p. 186.

⁷² Jelin, ‘The Politics of Memory’, p. 52.

themselves as works of art. While in 1995 the group's average age was between the late-teens and early-twenties, by 2011 most of the members were in their mid-thirties. If one of the main issues for the organisation was how to deal with the question of legacy, the problem (and the privilege) of staying alive, to some extent the group failed to work against the condition of not being children, but adults. In some respects, the group became a cocoon from where to remember their glorious adolescent days during the 1990s.

The period initiated in 2003 brought new pressures to the organisation. For almost ten years, the demands of justice performed by the group stuck to a well-known tagline: *Otro gobierno, misma impunidad* ('Another government, the same impunity'). Nonetheless, when Néstor Kirchner took office in 2003 a new period began. Seeking a heroic narrative, the current administrations have taken the position of the victims as their main flags. This shift also created an awkward situation among the association of the relatives. 'When a government transforms your principles into public policies, two different things might occur: you can get totally dislocated, as happened to a lot of us, or you can give your support. This is what I did', acknowledged Pisoni, who now works at the Parliament of Buenos Aires. In Chapter 5 I will explore further on the new status gained by the descendants. By now, it is important to bear in mind that 2003 is also *La Cámpora*'s foundational year, the youngest activist branch of the official party, which was created by Máximo Kirchner, son of the presidential couple. Some of its main leaders began their activism in H.I.J.O.S.. As I will address by the end of this thesis, especially after Kirchner's death, *La Cámpora* has been gaining political relevance and is expected to occupy ten positions in the new Parliament.⁷³

Moreover, the end of the 'culture of impunity' and the effective reopening of the trials in 2006, imposed new challenges and dilemmas on the association of the descendants. If for almost 15 years the claim had been 'If there is no Justice, moral condemnation will come', from then on a major adjustment was required.⁷⁴ Also, the legendary slogan *Juicio y Castigo* ('Justice and Punishment') had to be revised. Eventually, a new pitch emerged, maybe not as powerful as the original one: 'The genocides are

⁷³ Mariana Verón, 'La Cámpora será un nuevo polo de poder en el Congreso', *La Nación*, 21 August 2011 <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1399559-la-campora-sera-un-polo-de-poder-en-el-nuevo-congreso> [accessed 10 November 2011]

⁷⁴ In the original: 'Si no hay Justicia, habrá condena moral' (my translation).

judged by a trial but condemned by everybody'. The new supportive position also involved a change of outfit; the group invited actors and media people to pose with their brand new T-shirt. 'I put on the T-shirt of the trials and punishment'. Truthful to its activist style, H.I.J.O.S. made the courts the occasion for participatory art: 'Come to draw in the trials', is one of the on-going campaigns.⁷⁵

Nowadays, H.I.J.O.S.' constitution has also changed. Not only has the number of activists dropped, but also most of them are no longer children of the disappeared: they do not have *pedigree*. I would like to suggest that this transformation of the group's background also speaks about a thriving experience of transmission. It shows how loss does not belong entirely to a 'wounded family' but was, at least partially, transferred to the wider society. While tempting new generations into activism, H.I.J.O.S. also contributed to expand the 'vicinity' of trauma. When the discourses of memory have been rendered official, new voices promote alternative combinations of loss and laughter. These new experiments will be the focus of the following chapters. They offer fresh landscapes and textures to re-work the ongoing tensions explored in H.I.J.O.S.. They bring on stage non-normative performances of blood and alternative narratives of grief. They are, in many ways, H.I.J.O.S.' heirs. The legacy is strong. Despite all contradictions, the descendants indicate how a loud laugh can always emerge from loss.

⁷⁵ In the original: 'Vení a dibujar a los juicios' (my translation). For further information see: http://www.H.I.J.O.S.capital.org.ar/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=766&Itemid&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+H.I.J.O.S.-capital+%28H.I.J.O.S.%29&utm_content=Twitter [accessed 26 October 2010]

Undoing the cult of the victim: Three films in dialogue: *Los Rubios* (Albertina Carri, 2003), *M* (Nicolas Prividera, 2007) and *La mujer sin cabeza* (Lucrecia Martel, 2008).

Introduction

In the context of a restored and proud democracy, a substantial number of film directors began to respond to Argentina's violent past. *La historia oficial* ('The Official Story', Luis Puenzo, 1985) was precisely the 'official' and earnest point of departure for this series of films.¹ *El exilio de Gardel: Tangos* ('Tangos, The Exile of Gardel', Pino Solanas, 1985), *Muro de Silencio* ('A Wall of Silence', Lila Stantic, 1993), *Buenos Aires ViceVersa* (Alejandro Agresti, 2004) and *Kamchatka* (Marcelo Piñeyro, 2002) are only a small number of the films that have informed this series. This new cinematic repertoire corresponded to an incipient democratic culture in need of forging a new pedagogical conscience. In this context, these typically testimonial pieces have mostly monumentalized the past while adhering to the cult of the victim.

A new genre emerged in the 1990s when the descendants of those who went missing introduced their own narratives to re-engage with the past. This series includes *Papá Iván* (María Inés Roqué, 2004); *(h) Historias cotidianas* (Andrés Habegger, 2001); *H.I.J.O.S.: El alma en dos* ('H.I.J.O.S.: Split Soul', Marcelo Céspedes and Carmen Guarini, 2002); *Che vo cachai* (Laura Bendersky, 2003); *En ausencia* ('In Absence', Lucía Cedrón, 2002), *Figli/Hijos* (Sons & Daughters, Marco Bechis, 2002); and *Nietos (Identidad y memoria)* (Benjamin Avila, 2004), among others. Still, the unwritten rule of the early post-dictatorship period stipulated that relatives and survivors must honour the name of the vanished through forceful comments on truth and justice. In this way, the descendant's testimonial effervescence remained mostly attached to the legitimacy of the 'wounded family'. Nonetheless, two films have contested the dominant tradition in remarkable ways: *Los Rubios* ('The Blonds',

¹ *La historia oficial* was also the first Latin American film to receive the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Feature in 1986.

2003), the provocative film directed by Albertina Carri, and *M* (2007) an extended documentary by the debut filmmaker Nicolás Prividera.

In this chapter, I will first show how both films challenged the compulsory demand for genealogical inscription that became mainstream within human rights discourse. By means of what Jacques Derrida calls a process of ‘countersignature’ – that I have also referred in Chapter 1 (p. 61), I will argue that both films queer traditional victimizing narratives while bringing into light new images and landscapes that refer to and surpass the nostalgic evocation of the missing.² As Jens Andermann suggests, both films could be thought of as remarkable examples of a series of ‘post-memory documentaries’, in which the descendants stage their own family albums, ‘autobiographical or “autofictional” docu-essays about orphaned selves inquiring about their own identities and those of their abducted parents and relatives.’³

Second, I will bring into play *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, 2008), a fictional film directed by Lucrecia Martel, one of the major stylists of contemporary cinema, and a founding member of the so-called New Argentine Cinema (NAC). In the mid-1990s during a grave economic crisis, this enthusiastic new wave of directors began shooting mundane, gritty and mostly urban features, avoiding the more rhetorical declamations of their predecessors. Films by NAC directors include *Rapado* (Martín Rejtman, 1992), *Picado fino* (‘Fine Powder’, Esteban Sapir, 1996), *Pizza, birra, faso* (‘Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes’, Bruno Stagnaro and Adrián Caetano, 1998), *Mundo grúa* (‘Crane World’, Pablo Trapero, 1999) and *La libertad* (*Freedom*, Lisandro Alonso, 2001). These varied minimal stories avoid both moral judgements and sententious political statements. In fact, this new generation of filmmakers has been defined in opposition to the allegorical style used by key directors of the 1980s such as Luis Puenzo, Eliseo Subiela, María Luisa Bemberg and Adolfo Aristarain. This new wave of films also marks a difference with politically committed cinema of previous decades, in which Leonardo Favio, Fernando Pino Solanas, and Fernando Birri are key figures. Although the diversity of universes inside the NAC resists any unifying tag, emphasis on the social present, everyday life and marginal languages

² Jacques Derrida, ‘As if I were dead: An interview with Jacques Derrida’, in *Applying: To Derrida*, ed. by J. Brannigan, R. Robbins and J. Wolfreys (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 212-226 (p. 220).

³ Jens Andermann, *New Argentine Cinema* (London and New York: Tauris, 2012), p. 107.

have been some of its most distinctive characteristics.⁴

Although the so-called ‘genre of the disappeared’ and the NAC have been evolving along quite separate paths, I will locate my analysis of *La mujer sin cabeza* within this double context.⁵ I suggest that my reading of Martel’s film can help to de-centre further the biological inscription of the human rights movement. Faithful to different traditions and styles, Carri, Prividera and Martel’s films have received broad but individual attention from local and global critics. I will show in what ways a dialogue among them can help to re-think issues of memory, performance and heritage in contemporary Argentina. Against the official narratives of mourning emerging during the ‘Kirchnerist’ period, I will show how these films can suggest non-normative readings of the aftermath of violence.⁶

Los Rubios: the split of the ‘daughter’

Los Rubios opens with a seemingly playful scene – a doll’s house full of plastic toys illustrating the quotidian routine of a family living in the countryside. A few shots later, the scene is not so peaceful, not so quiet, nor so familiar. The plastic toys turn out to be the deferred traces of a family that is no longer possible, and perhaps has never been possible. The quiet environment of a rural farm emerges as the parable of the detention camps where many of the disappeared were held captive. It soon becomes clear that the audience is going to witness nothing but the director’s story, or rather her attempts to recover the traces of her parents Ana Maria Caruso and Roberto Carri, activists and prestigious intellectuals who were kidnapped by the military forces on 24 February 1977, and murdered that same year.

⁴ David Oubiña, ‘Argentina’s gritty resurgence’, UNESCO courier, (2000) http://www.unesco.org/courier/2000_10/uk/doss26.htm [accessed 15 October 2009]; Horacio Bernades, Diego Lerer, and Sergio Wolf, *New Argentine Cinema: Themes, Authors and Trends of Innovation* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Tatanka, 2002); Gonzalo Aguilar, *Otros mundos. Un ensayo sobre el Nuevo Cine Argentino* (Buenos Aires: Santiago Arcor Editor, 2006).

⁵ The figure of Lita Stantic straddles both traditions. Film producer, screenplay writer, director and wife of a disappeared person, she has been one of the most important producers of the post-dictatorship films, as well as being a key figure in the NAC.

⁶ Earlier versions of this chapter have been published. See Cecilia Sosa, ‘Queering acts of mourning in the aftermath of Argentina’s dictatorship: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and *Los Rubios* (2003)’ in *The Memory of State Terrorism in the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay*, ed. by Vincent Druliolle and Francesca Lessa (New York: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 63-85 and Sosa, ‘A Counter-narrative of Argentine Mourning: *The Headless Woman* (2008), by Lucrecia Martel’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26. 7-8 (2009), 250-262. I am also grateful for the feedback received at the symposium ‘Plans of focus: On the films of Lucrecia Martel’, Sussex University, 9 June 2011.

Los Rubios has nothing in common with traditional documentaries. All the conventions of the genre seem to be displaced, removed, queered. The point of departure is disturbing. The person who tells the story is not Carri herself but an improbable alter ego, a young woman in her late twenties who says to the camera: 'My name is Analía Couceiro, I'm an actor and in this film I play the part of Albertina Carri'.⁷ In her analysis of the film, Gabriela Nouzeilles argues that Carri disestablishes the public persona of the daughter of the disappeared.⁸ I suggest that she does more than that. By converting the leading character into a fictional figure, the film challenges the identity politics of the post-dictatorship period. As I will indicate, the splitting of the first-person narrator also displaces the idea of a 'wounded family' and the 'injured relatives' as the only victims of the military repression. Yet, Carri does not step outside the screen narrative. The splitting of characters only works to highlight the director's presence in the story. The audience follows her providing the actor with advice or debating with the crew the recurrent ups and downs of the film. This ambivalent but still insidious presence of a 'real victim' in the film not only embodies the tension of conceiving narratives of mourning beyond the 'direct victims', but also contests the idea of testimony as the expression of the private self. In so doing, *Los Rubios* reveals the experimental, self-reflective and ultimately impossible 'backstage' of grief.

The material for a film

Unlike conventional documentaries that deal with the memory of the 'disappeared', Carri does not investigate the quality of the evidence. She does not want to show heroes or damage. By contrast with H.I.J.O.S.' justification of the parental activism, *Los Rubios* rejects any nostalgic exaltation of the past. All the same, the 'epic' stories recalled by the colleagues of the murdered couple are projected on television monitors, like awkward, uncomfortable or sterile fables of a buried past that the young crew views with infinite mistrust. Instead, the director prefers these domestic moments where the past seems to touch the present; for instance, references to her

⁷ In the original: 'Me llamo Analía Couceiro, soy actriz y en este film hago el papel de Albertina Carri' (from the film).

⁸ Gabriela Nouzeilles, 'Postmemory Cinema and the Future of the Past in Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios*', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 14 (2005), 266- 277 (p. 266).

father cheating in sports or the high-pitched sound of her mother's laugh. In this sense, Carri's film provides a sound case to illustrate the mischievous recollections of second generations, which, consonant with Marianne Hirsch's analysis on 'post-memory', seem to respond to 'imaginative investment, projection and creation' rather than to proper recall.⁹ The audience can follow the director's complains: 'All I have are my own vague memories contaminated by so many versions. Whatever I do to get the truth will probably take me further away', 'I need material for a film'.¹⁰ In fact, this 'material' will eventually emerge from an unforeseen, almost fictional encounter, as I will now explore.

At a crucial point in the film, the crew walks down to the proletarian quarter where the Carri family lived at the moment of the parents' kidnapping. They search for any trace left by the disappeared couple. Among the elusive responses of the neighbours, one sounds especially odd. An old lady who used to live next to the Carris comments:

I cannot remember anything about that family. I just know that the three girls were blonde, the father was blond, the mother was also blonde. They were all blondes.¹¹

After the episode, director and crew look puzzled; why are the brownish-haired family remembered as 'blonde'? Carri appears as confused as the others. One point becomes clear; they have found the material for a film. From this unexpected slippage, eventually the film takes its name. As the Argentine scholar Beatriz Sarlo argues, it is not difficult to understand why the Carris, an educated and intellectual family, was recalled as 'blonde' in the working class district. In fact, they did not have much in common with the rest of the inhabitants.¹² They were the foreigners; they were the *others*. There is an extra element that I would like to introduce here. In Argentina's struggle of classes, the opposition between rich and poor has been mostly

⁹ Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008), 103-128 (p. 107).

¹⁰ In the original: 'Todo lo que tengo son mis vagas memorias contaminadas por tantas versiones. Todo lo que haga para acercarme a la verdad me llevan aún más lejos. Necesito material para una película' (my translation).

¹¹ In the original: 'No puedo acordarme de nada de esa familia. Lo único que me acuerdo era que las tres nenas eran rubias, el papá era rubio, la mamá era rubia. Eran todos rubios' (my translation).

¹² Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado. Cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo. Una discusión* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2005), 146-151.

drawn in ‘coloured’ terms. In fact, working class sectors have been traditionally known as *cabecitas negras* (‘black heads’).¹³ I would like to make the case that *Los Rubios* drives this indubitable racial narrative to unforeseen implications. Rather than a sign of class, the film proffers the idea of ‘blondeness’ as a feeling of strangeness in relation to the dictatorship’s heritage. I shall expand on this.

A question of fidelity

The titles have not yet finished when we witness the actor reading passages of Roberto Carri’s combative oeuvre. The tone is so imperturbable, so distant that it seems as if the words of the missing intellectual were coming from an ineffable past. Contradicting those who qualify Carri’s film as ‘frivolous’ and even ‘selfish’, I contend that *Los Rubios* enacts a non-normative form of responsibility.¹⁴ Although this early scene seems to stage an irreverent mood of engaging with the paternal figure, I suggest that Carri built her idea of responsibility in a more oblique way. Derrida’s reflections on responsibility will help me to frame this argument further. While considering his own death, Derrida argues that responsibility is always an obligation ‘to honour the name which is not mine’, a name that ‘is always in the future’.¹⁵ The invitation is perturbing: how could it be possible to be true to a name that has not yet arrived? For Derrida the answer takes the form of an aporia: ‘[y]ou receive an old name from the past, but a name *as such* remains of a name-to-come; and the only way to sign with a name-to-come is, or should be a countersignature’.¹⁶ Drawing on this framework, I suggest that by countersigning her own name, Carri proposes a connection with loss that moves across time.

To address this point further it is important to bear in mind that in the aftermath of Argentina’s dictatorship, the possibility of working through the legacies of trauma already involves a spectral relation with the past. As already explored, if the *Madres*’ performance proposed a battle in the name of a backward fidelity, the question of how to honour the name of the missing also haunted the activism of the descendants. In

¹³ Argentine President Juan Domingo Peron (1946-1952, 1953-1955 and 1973-1974) has reversed the pejorative origin of this expression to praise the working class, the first source of legitimization of his governments.

¹⁴ Martín Kohan, ‘La apariencia celebrada’, in *Punto de Vista*, N 78, (2004), 24-30 (p. 29).

¹⁵ Derrida, ‘As if I were dead’, p. 220.

¹⁶ Derrida, ‘As if I were dead’, p. 220. Derrida’s emphasis.

these terms, both responses constitute a strong inquiry in relation to the boundaries of kinship in an expanded conception of time. After the murderous state interrupted traditional lines of kinship, the linkage between lineage and truth remains problematic. I would like to suggest that *Los Rubios* brings this battle to non-normative stages. Whereas the *Madres* and H.I.J.O.S. revealed a sort of ‘addiction’ to honouring the name of the missing, for the first time a *daughter* manages to establish a different fight with the ghosts. In an interview conducted after the release of her film, Carri argues: ‘I am not interested in an advocate perspective. The name H.I.J.O.S. scares me. I do not want to be a “daughter” all my life. I want to be other things’.¹⁷ And she certainly does other things. For instance, she stages her parents’ kidnapping by transforming them into Playmobil figures, a brand of plastic toys which acquired cult status within middle class young adults raised during the dictatorship. In Carri’s film, a crafted animation shows the plastic toys suddenly abducted by a spaceship that swoops down from the sky and whisks them away. In so doing, I suggest that *Los Rubios* reintroduces the figure of the disappeared not as a familial property, but as the insuperable character of a fiction. Moreover, through this process, loss also becomes transferred to the spectators. In this sense, Carri proposes a narrative of grief that goes beyond those who were directly affected by violence. This is also a form of responsibility towards the future, which does not deny a strange loyalty in relation to the parental absence. In fact, fidelity does not necessarily imply repetition or reproduction but difference. Rather, as Derrida frames it, the idea of being true to the other, ‘*true* in terms of *fidelity*’, always implies to ‘add something *new*, to give something to the other, something that the other could receive and could, in his or her turn, actually or as a ghost, countersign’.¹⁸ In those terms, the plastic toys could be taken as a playful supplement that emerges out of the experience of mourning, an *addition*, and ultimately a form of countersignature. This dislocation of familial names also suggests alternative forms of sharing in loss.

In this context, and despite its impertinent mood, *Los Rubios* brings to light a strange form of tenderness. In one of the last scenes we can see the actor in front of a birthday

¹⁷ In the original: ‘No me interesaba la mirada reivindicativa y me daba impresión el nombre [H.I.J.O.S.]. Yo no quiero ser hija toda la vida. Quiero ser otras cosas’ (my translation). See María Moreno, ‘Esa rubia debilidad’, *Página 12*, 23 October 2003. <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-1001-2003-10-23.html> [accessed 29 May 2010]

¹⁸ Derrida, ‘As if I were dead’, p. 220. Derrida’s emphasis.

cake. She says:

I hate having to make a wish to blow out the candles on my birthday. I spent many birthdays making the same wish and I cannot stop wishing for the same thing: that my mum would come back, that my dad would come back, that they would come back soon.¹⁹

The scene is shot many times. Carri does not like the results and obliges her actor to repeat the list of wishes again and again. More than ever, the uncanny split of the figure of the daughter displaces the familial content of the scene. Yet, the strange futurity of blowing out the candles of an improbable past also brings the desire for a different future. In those terms, *Los Rubios* can be thought of as a donation, a gift, for those who are not there to receive it. In fact, as Derrida suggests, there is a secret link between gift and death, which makes the gift always a form of the impossible.²⁰ Moreover, that 'impossible gift' becomes extended to a fleeting community of non-kin survivors; those who may blow out the candles wishing for another form of sharing in the face of loss.

Becoming blondes

In *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*, Butler writes that Antigone's figure 'is caught in a web of relations that produce no coherent position within kinship'.²¹ Something similar could be argued in relation to the Argentine daughters and sons of vanished parents, brought up with relatives and friends in the best-case scenario, or with their appropriators in the worst. In most cases, without clear knowledge of their origins, the system of kinship remains unintelligible. I would like to suggest that *Los Rubios* could offer an alternative answer to this non-normative lineage.

By the end of the film, Couceiro, the actor performing Carri's role, stands in the

¹⁹ In the original: 'Odio pedir deseos para soplar las velitas e mi cumpleaños. Pasé tantos cumpleaños pidiendo el mismo deseo que no puedo pedir otra cosa: que vuelva mi mamá, que vuelva mi papá, que vuelvan pronto' (from the film).

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago and London: Chicago Press, 2001), p. 164.

²¹ Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 57.

middle of the countryside. She is not alone. The entire crew and the director are also there. They all wear blonde wigs on their heads. The last scene of the film shows the group walking towards the horizon while a pop-song plays in the background: *'I can see and speak and feel asleep under your influence, I can say [...] something has changed; what a pleasure this pain, I am not going to hide from my destiny'*²² (see figure 2, p. 211). The end of the film has been controversial. The Argentine writer Martín Kohan argues that the blonde wigs involve 'an essay of lightness, in which poses have managed to pass as posture, and lightness as gravity'.²³ My approach is quite different. Undoubtedly, the wigs make reference to the testimony of the old neighbour who recalled the Carris as blonde. Nevertheless, I suggest that these wigs are not just a 'pose', not even an ironic quote, or the material sign of an oblique misunderstanding projected in time. By contrast, I argue that the blonde wigs function as the deferred engagement that refuses the reduction of kinship to a bloodline chain of victims. Indeed, the members of the crew are not only descendants of the disappeared. Most of them have not been directly touched by violence. In their cases, those wigs appear as a fetishized object that draws the figure of a community beyond bloodline inscriptions. While extending the legitimacy of loss to a variety of kinship forms, the wigs give room to non-normative forms of joy emerged out of grief.

There is another point that can help to clarify this argument. As the Argentine writer María Moreno argues, the wigs were also a fetish outfit during the 1970s, which leftist activists wore during the clandestine period as a way of adopting a fictional character.²⁴ I suggest that *Los Rubios* projects the resonances of this militant outfit towards the future. In her turn, Nouzeilles makes a sound point by considering the scene of the wigs as a 'pantomimic performance of displaced identities'.²⁵ This case can be taken a step further. Interestingly, Walter Benjamin suggests an intimate relationship between pantomime and grief.²⁶ For him, pantomime is the ostentatious form in which mourning takes place, a sort of choreographed gesture that is ultimately

²² The song is *Influencia* ('Influence'), played by Charly García, one of the most well-known Argentine musicians. It belongs to the album *Influencia* (EMI, Buenos Aires, 2002).

²³ In the original: '(...) un ensayo de levedad; donde las poses consiguen pasar por postura, y la levedad por gesto grave (my translation). See Kohan, 'La apariencia celebrada', p. 29.

²⁴ Moreno, 'Esa rubia debilidad', <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-1001-2003-10-23.html> [accessed 29 May 2010]

²⁵ Nouzeilles, 'Postmemory Cinema and the Future', p. 275

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, tran. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1985), p. 119.

related to a certain sensuousness of the bodies coming back from loss, as Butler notices.²⁷ Butler quotes Benjamin: ‘Comedy—or more precisely: the pure joke—is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt.’²⁸ Drawing upon the image of the dress, Butler goes further by arguing that the sensuousness involved in grief can be grasped as the ‘*material of clothing*’, which is ‘suddenly, or even unexpectedly, felt against the flesh.’²⁹ Even more, when for her that dress appears as if it were laughing. Precisely, I would suggest that the blonde wigs that close Carri’s film could be grasped as an encounter with a similar ‘material of clothing’. The wigs appear as the costume, the artifice suddenly felt against the flesh in the face of grief. As if beckoning that laughing dress, the wigs recall the sensuousness that animates the crew walking toward the horizon. In this sense, the blonde wigs are the artifice that laughs in mourning. By transferring the experience of loss to an exchangeable costume, even a militant outfit, the blonde wigs draw a more inclusive idea of being affected by violence.³⁰ In so doing, they show the familial framework in its artifice, and its potential undoing.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler suggests that grief has the capacity to un-do the subject, enabling new attachments and configurations.³¹ In a parallel way, I suggest that the choreography of those bodies walking together stage a form of mourning that is not resolved into melancholia. Rather, it emerges as a mode of becoming other, of becoming blonde, and being undone by the process of loss before others. In this sense, *Los Rubios*’ last scene can be conceived of as gracefully performative: the wigs act as a fetish element of a post-memorial form of inter-corporeal transmission of trauma. The youthful team embodies the spectral community of those who can partake in and debate a common destiny. What this last scene reads, then, is the crisis of traditional forms of kinship governed by the normativity of blood. It calls into question the state’s connivance with that familial framework, suggesting an emergent ethical order

²⁷ Judith Butler, ‘Afterword’ in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 467-473 (p. 470).

²⁸ Butler, ‘Afterword’, p. 470.

²⁹ Butler, ‘Afterword’, p. 470. My emphasis.

³⁰ I will explore further the connection between loss and costumes during the analysis of Lola Arias’ production *Mi vida despues* (2009) in Chapter 3.

³¹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), p. 21. Butler’s emphasis.

where more diverse social arrangements are possible. Thus, *Los Rubios* provides a visual narrative for those new attachments that might not necessarily be spoken. In so doing, it envisions the unexpected ties formed in the aftermath of trauma. This community suggests an expanded cast of survivors, which ultimately comes to be based on friendship. After all, as Derrida reminds us of, friendship and survivability are intimately connected.³² This spectral conviviality in mourning is the political promise that informs Carri's film; one in which the spectators are also invited.

Carri and Prividera: a 'despicable' dispute

Prividera's debut film features a personal investigation of his mother's disappearance. The director shares with Carri the same generational belonging. They were four and three years old respectively when their parents were kidnapped and they do not have accurate memories of them. When *M* was first screened at the Mar del Plata International Festival in 2007, a quarrel emerged between both filmmakers. Prividera said that although *Los Rubios* was a strong inspiration for him, a key difference cut across both films.³³ He argued that while Carri's parents had renowned names, his mother was just a *perejil* (parsley), a term that in the local slang means the one that has not voice and vote, and in the context of the film refers to the unknown activists who never really 'counted' in the list of the famous disappeared. Upset, Carri replied saying that the distinction was '*miserable*' ('despicable') and impishly added: 'it sounds as if we were terminal patients competing to know who is worst'.³⁴ After the fearsome dispute, both directors remained silent. In this section, I would like to open up that debate. I wish to explore the conceptions of victims and survivors that are staged in these films, and what kinds of hierarchies among the disappeared they establish. Following the differential status examined inside H.I.J.O.S.' organisation, I would like to consider what are the implications of acknowledging the idea of 'pedigree' among disappeared and descendants. In addition, I am interested in considering the dialogue that can be established between *Los Rubios* and *M* in the context of a government that officially adopted the lineage of the victims.

³² Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 171.

³³ Gustavo Noriega, 'Lo que nos hacen' in *El Amante*, (Buenos Aires, 2008).
<http://www.elamante.com/content/view/1254/66/> [accessed 15 July 2011]

³⁴ In the original: 'Es como si fuéramos enfermos terminales compitiendo a ver quién está peor'. See Gustavo Noriega, 'Lo que nos hacen' in *El Amante*, (Buenos Aires, 2008).
<http://www.elamante.com/content/view/1254/66/> [accessed 15 July 2011].

***M*: a personal thriller**

In March 1976, a few days before the coup d'état in Argentina, members of the military forces kidnapped Marta Sierra from her apartment. She was a biologist working for the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA). Although her name was loosely associated with *Montoneros*, the main group of Peronist guerilla, the attempts to find any information about her fate failed. Thirty years later, permanently wearing an old-fashioned raincoat, her eldest son began a personal investigation of the case. Prividera plays the role of a detective. *M* follows the injured son endlessly chasing clues around official halls, human rights offices and marginal neighbourhoods. Searching for answers, Prividera takes fieldtrips to the suburbs to examine INTA's premises and also reaches *La escuelita*, a rural school, which was the centre of his mother's activism. The director conducts an impressive list of interviews with his mother's friends, colleagues and former activists. Even so, after two hours of film, there are no full responses, just a tiny monument inaugurated by the end, which bears Marta Sierra's name.

Although *M* and *Los Rubios* deal with parallel situations, their strategies radically differ. When Carri's film has been depicted as a 'frivolous' and 'de-politicizing', *M* has been compared with the nine-and-a-half hour holocaust documentary *Shoah* (1985), directed by Claude Lanzmann.³⁵ While Carri transforms the figure of the daughter into a fictional character, Prividera remains at the forefront of his film at all times. If Carri apparently dismisses the testimonies of former activists, Prividera fully engages with a loud in-depth analysis and cross-questioning of his interviewees. Mostly relying on pictures and Super 8-footage, he edits, labels and quotes, deconstructing and eventually mis-performing all these voices. The film is full of whispers, shouts and awkward silences. It combines a stubborn and petulant attitude with sophisticated references to well-known philosophers that the director mischievously slips into his angry speeches. The effect is corrosive. Standing at the front of the scene, Prividera plays an angry and sometimes useless jury. But,

³⁵ Like *M*, *Shoah* is made without the use of any documentary footage, and uses only first-person testimony from Jewish, Polish, and German individuals. Prividera's use of Hannah Arendt's and others' quotes to support his arguments echoes the French filmmaker's style.

ultimately (and desperately), he tries to understand.

A shift to the collective

From the first scene, Prividera's main concern is to make clear that the tragedy involved in the disappearance of his mother was not personal but collective. He portrays himself interpellated by a foreign journalist on a TV show: 'Are you angry?'³⁶ 'Of course, I am angry and I think everybody should be angry. And this is not a personal anger at something that they did particularly to me', he warns.³⁷ In a subsequent interview, the director evoked the same question to amend his response: 'When I said I was angry and that everybody should be angry, I should have said I was "outraged". Anger is personal, outrage is collective.'³⁸ Some film critiques consider that Prividera's attempts to bridge the personal and the collective are embedded in ideological confusion and that his film witnesses a 'political weakness'.³⁹ By contrast, I would suggest that *M* sheds light on unexplored resonances left by the experience of trauma.

In order to develop this argument further, there are some extra elements that should be taken into account. First, the possibility of drawing on 'negative' feelings as a political tool is not Prividera's self-creation. As explored in Chapter 1, H.I.J.O.S. managed to transform individual shame into a collective spirit of rebellion that could be shared by the wider society. To some extent, the descendants' activism prepared the ground for *M*. Thus, the director is not entirely alone. His 'bad feelings' are part of a broader political struggle. Nonetheless, differently from H.I.J.O.S.' vindication of parental activism, Prividera acts as a master of suspicion. He is still angry, not only at the military, but also at the 'revolutionary' leaders of the guerrilla movement of the 1970s, who mostly abandoned their people to death. In this sense, anger constitutes the

³⁶ In the original: '¿Está enojado?' (from the film).

³⁷ In the original: 'Por supuesto que estoy enojado y creo que todo el mundo debería estarlo. Y esto no es un enojo personal por algo que me hicieron solamente a mí' (from the film).

³⁸ In the original: 'Donde dije que estaba enojado y que todos tendríamos que estar enojados, debería haber dicho indignados. Es que el enojo es individual; la indignación es colectiva' (my translation). See Mariano Kairuz, 'La pesquisa', in *Radar*, 18 March 2007 <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-3671-2007-03-18.html> [accessed 5 November 2011]

³⁹ Gustavo Noriega, 'Lo que nos hacen', *El Amante*, 24 November 2008, <http://www.elamante.com/content/view/1254/66/> [accessed 15 July 2011]

affective basis of the film. It exposes the raw, unedited backstage of grief.

Second, Prividera's political anger is accompanied by a defacement of the figure of the father. In *M* there is no father. Although the audience eventually learns that Prividera's progenitor has been close to him all his life, still there are no testimonies or pictures of him throughout the film. The figure of the father seems to be pervasively omitted. Some critics contend that this absence was an intentional directorial decision, even a 'subtraction' of the film.⁴⁰ Interrogated about this issue, Prividera argued: 'My father, as many other people, did not want to participate in the film and I have respected his will.'⁴¹ Critics went further, suggesting that the director did not show the same respect for other interviewees' feelings. Certainly, *M* pays no deference to survivors. One of the scenes shows Prividera complaining about a friend of his mother who refused to give her testimony. The woman had cancer and argued that the medical advice was to avoid disturbing issues. In spite of this, the director insists: 'She must take responsibility for her actions'. The discussion with the woman reaches an uncomfortable end. Prividera paraphrases her sceptically:

'Martita was not lucky?' Bad luck as if she had had an accident. Which accident? The accident of having trusted others, her environment, her colleagues, a project that did not work? Bad luck? Yes, we all had bad luck.⁴²

M is born of these unequal, unbalanced affects. Unlike traditional films that honour the names of the victims, Prividera offers a chaotic and violent response where the past emerges as suspicious, multi-layered and disarmed as much as the labels he brandishes in the face of his interviewees. In this obsessive collage, the only one that emerges as always clean, young and beautiful is his mother. In her research on Argentine cinema and politics, the local scholar Ana Amado argues that *M* could be conceived of as an

⁴⁰ Gustavo Noriega, 'Lo que nos hacen', *El Amante*, 24 November 2008, <http://www.elamante.com/content/view/1254/66/> [accessed 15 July 2011]

⁴¹ Jorge García, 'Una entrevista con Nicolás Prividera', *El Amante*, 179 (2008).

⁴² In the original: '¿Martita no tuvo suerte? ¿Mala suerte como si fuera tenido un accidente, qué accidente? ¿El haber confiado en otros, en su entorno, en sus colegas, en un proyecto que no funcionó? ¿Mala suerte? Sí, todos tuvimos mala suerte' (my translation).

involuntary version of the Oedipal narrative.⁴³ Certainly, the enhancement of the missing mother accompanied by the defacement of the father stand as the perfect Oedipal postcard. Nonetheless, I suggest also considering it as a subtle form of countersignature. In fact, Prividera's film not only rejects any family *living* authority, but also any conventional narrative of grief.

When by the end of 2007 Fernández de Kirchner succeeded her husband as the head of government, the descendants and other relatives' association were for the first time welcomed within the circle of power. As if contesting this official blessing, Prividera's film proposes a disturbing response that has not been rendered normative. *M* shows how official recognition is not enough. Whereas the government currently flirts with the 1970's rebellious spirit, *M* proposes a critical dissection of those mythical discourses to expose them in their inconsistencies and limits. In so doing, *M* plays the role of the *killjoy*. Against the celebratory mood of the relatives' associations facing the new institutional period, Prividera complains so much that nobody wants to listen. He shows that there are still visceral wounds that have not healed. Even so, bad feelings may also demand a collective political tie.

While addressing the fearful and vindictive anxieties emerged in the wake of September 11 in the US, Butler suggests that mourning can shed light on an alternative form of community. She writes:

‘[m]any people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order’.⁴⁴

Drawing upon this, I suggest that Prividera's film can be read as highly political, rather than privatising. In fact, *M* exposes the present-ness of grief not just for an injured son but also for the wider society. While denying all kindred support, Prividera introduces a sense of vulnerability that it is not personal but political. He is the injured son, but also the one who stresses the collective basis of his injury. In this

⁴³ Ana Amado, *La imagen justa. Cine argentino y política (1980-2007)* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2009), p. 171.

⁴⁴ Butler, *Prekarious Life*, p. 22.

way, his film shows how anger, rage and a long list of ‘ugly feelings’ can also create new forms of tie.⁴⁵ Once again, Butler’s work is helpful to push this argument further. She argues that in the act of mourning ‘something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are’.⁴⁶ In a parallel sense, I contend that *M* reveals the ambiguous borders in which grief flows from the private to the collective. In so doing, it offers a rich example for investigating the entanglement between mourning and kinship. By overexposing the figure of the injured son, Prividera’s film battles at the threshold in which blood gives way to more fluid and irregular affiliations. Finally, it shows how anger can also forge an alternative sense of community.

Hierarchies of lives and deaths

M is not only the initial letter of *Madre* (‘Mother’) and *Montoneros* but also of *Memoria* (‘Memory’) and *Muerte* (‘Death’). It is also, and fundamentally, the initial letter of a single name: Marta, Marta Sierra. For more than two hours, *M* confronts the audience with the endless repetition of the same questions: who was that woman? What can be said about her political life? At some points, the film seems to be chasing an uncanny name that was never there, almost an *impropriety*, something that can never be truly possessed. In fact, as Derrida writes, the ‘proper name’ is intimately related to death: ‘The name, to be distinguished from the bearer, is always and *a priori* a dead man’s name, a name of death’.⁴⁷ I contend that Argentina’s violent past also produced a disorder in relation to proper names. By subtracting thousands of bodies from the public sphere, the murderous state left no names to mourn. To cover that lack, a new term emerged: *desaparecidos* (‘the disappeared’). The Argentine scholar Nicolás Casullo criticizes the expression, arguing that it was the Military Junta who first coined it; thereby, its iteration can take the form of a second death.⁴⁸ Even if the term ‘disappeared’ was born from loss, the struggle of the relatives’ associations succeeded in reversing its abject origin to enhance its collective resonances. In this

⁴⁵ I am using Sianny Ngai’s expression, see *Ugly feelings* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁴⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 22.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Christie V, McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 7.

⁴⁸ Nicolás Casullo, *Pensar entre épocas* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2004), p. 105.

context, the word *desaparecidos* has been transformed in a national struggle.

Even so, during the course of Prividera's film the name 'Marta Sierra' always falls apart. For the director, the name of his mother is not something already given, but rather a name-to-come. With this in mind, I would like to go back to the dispute that Prividera had with the director of *Los Rubios* in 2007. I suggest that when Prividera compared his nameless mother to Carri's eminent parents he touched a nerve, which remained omitted from the narratives of the relatives. The director pointed towards the existence of a hierarchy of lives (and deaths) among the disappeared. In fact, Carri's film did not need to bring to light her parents' names because their names were already known. This was not an option for Prividera. For him, the name of his mother was the object of a struggle. The only way in which it became available was through a work of mourning, which took the shape of a film.

In this sense, Prividera emerges as the *son* who dares to interrogate the figure of the disappeared. His film addresses how this highly respected figure also dismisses singularity since its political force has been tightly attached to the fixity of a number: 30,000 (the iconic number of disappeared). In this sense, Prividera's film seems to be inquiring whether certain vanished lives may count more than others. In the wake of September 11, Butler also raises a parallel concern: 'Who counts as human? Whose lives are real?', she asks in *Precarious Life*.⁴⁹ Her answer is compelling: 'If a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note'.⁵⁰ Butler's argument is especially piercing in Argentina's context where the current governments adopted the name of the 'disappeared' as their own political platform. Before these deeds, *M* suggests that there is a silent hierarchy, which establishes that some vanished lives could be more valuable than others. In this sense, the film elusively addresses how some 'disappeared' have been quickly and publicly celebrated while others have remained pervasively neglected. In so doing, Prividera's film suggests the existence of the *faceless* among the disappeared, those who still do not count as human since they do not qualify as 'grievable', to use Butler's words.⁵¹ These are the so-called '*perejiles*', those who have remained in shadows to the point

⁴⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 20.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 34.

⁵¹ In *Precarious Life* Butler addresses a profound hierarchy of lives and states, that there are lives that do not count as human, the 'faceless'. See Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. xvii.

that they have become unreal. In this way, Prividera responds to Carri. To some extent, his film can be conceived as the countersignature of hers.

Still, this argument can be taken a step further. In his work on friendship, Derrida argues that ‘everything in political discourse that appeals to birth, to nature, finally conceals the complexity of the political’.⁵² I have been arguing similarly in relation to contemporary Argentina. While the post-dictatorship period saw an overlap between bloodline ties and political lineages, the big challenge is to imagine affiliations that can be decoupled from this biological basis. On these grounds, I have proposed an expanded conception of kinship to address the legacies of trauma. I suggest that *M* undertakes that effort. Prividera’s film assumes the ontological disturbance in relation to the proper name, revealing the extent to which family-based organisations have applied a fraternal idea of the victim. In so doing, the film seeks an alternative lineage that does not rely on blood. In those terms, *M* does not propose a de-politicization but a re-politicization of the public sphere. In one of the interviews conducted by the release of the film, Prividera said that *M* is not a film to watch alone.⁵³ More than a dubious gesture of marketing, I suggest that his film speaks to an upcoming community, the unfamiliar and non-kin community of those who mourn: all those who, like him, may feel ‘outraged’, even though they might not have been *equally* affected by violence.

Beyond the survivors’ ‘right’

Certainly, Prividera’s and Carri’s films occupy an ambivalent place. They are the descendants; they have the *pedigree* to speak. My reading has gone in the opposite direction. I have explored how Carri and Prividera’s documentaries countersigned bloodline inscriptions of trauma, by showing how mourning exceeded the boundaries of the ‘wounded family’. In so doing, their films both ask for a political community furnished ‘on the basis of vulnerability and loss’, as Butler asks in a different but still connected context.⁵⁴ In spite of that original dispute that distanced the directors, their films make disparate and valuable contributions in that direction. *Los Rubios*’ final

⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London and New York: Verso, 2005) p. 93.

⁵³ Kairuz, ‘La pesquisa’, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-3671-2007-03-18.html>

⁵⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 20.

image portraying a blonde crew walking towards the future introduces a new time in contemporary Argentina, a 'post-memorial' period in which creative and even playful responses to loss are highly demanded. By the end of *M*, a memorial monument engraves Marta Sierra's name. It does not stand for a single name but also for those other *faceless* among the disappeared. In this sense, both films beckon and queer official modes of grief. They feature contested passions that still inhabit the aftermath of trauma. In so doing, they make the experience of mourning available for expanded publics.

A mysterious woman without head

With these ideas in mind, I wish to propose a dialogue with *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008), one of the most disturbing films from the so-called New Argentine Cinema of recent years. In this sense, I would like to show how a film that has puzzled international audiences could also suggest a counter-narrative of mourning for contemporary Argentina. When *La mujer sin cabeza* was screened at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival the reaction could not have been more apprehensive, a kind of unpleasant surprise at a supposed change of direction for a filmmaker whose earlier works, *La ciénaga* ('The Swamp', 2001) and *La niña santa* ('The Holy Girl', 2004) had been enthusiastically received on the international festival circuit.⁵⁵ Certainly, there is something specifically awkward about this film that constitutes the last fable of what Andermann calls a 'trilogy of family dramas'.⁵⁶ In this section, I will argue that the hushed mystery that underlies *La mujer sin cabeza* goes beyond any strictly cinematographic rationale. Rather, its 'queerness' is related to an uncomfortable test that the film imposes on its spectators, one which sheds light on the contemporary resonances of loss. I will present my argument alongside fragments of an interview that I conducted with Martel in May 2009 in Buenos Aires. My entrance will be her voice:

⁵⁵ *The Swamp*, a paradigmatic film and generally seen as one of the 'masterpieces' of the New Argentine Cinema, was awarded at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2001 and *The Holy Girl* was nominated for the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004. In contrast, reviews note the 'cold reception' received by *The Headless Woman* in 2008. See http://archivo.lavoz.com.ar/08/05/22/secciones/espectaculos/nota.asp?nota_id=205123 [accessed 10 November 2011]. During the first screening for the international press, the film was greeted by boos and jeers by the audience. See <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1014164-impensado-debut-para-lucrecia-martel-en-cannes> [accessed 10 November 2011]

⁵⁶ Andermann, *New Argentine Cinema*, p. 156.

My relationship to cinema is political. Cinema was the way I found to feel part of a community. Building my own discourse was tough. I feel ashamed of the social class I belong to, but nor could I develop my narrative from a position that I don't have any sort of lived experience of. My attempt at a solution is what appears in this film.⁵⁷

La mujer sin cabeza endeavours this challenge. In the following sections I will show how Martel's shame of class also invites an ethical response from the viewers.

The hands

The film is located in the never explicit territories of Salta, the director's home province in the north of Argentina. 'I never mention the word "Salta" in my films. It would be a betrayal. Salta's reality is always much more complex than my films', said Martel during a public interview in 2008.⁵⁸ The plot of the film is simple, even prosaic. A mobile phone sounds on a deserted provincial road. The driver, Vero, a middle-aged upper class woman, sporting a platinum blonde hairdo, tries to find the vibrating object within her bag, a slightly careless search, when there is a sudden crash. The accident opens a gap in the world, a before and an after. There has been a fatality. A shapeless bulk, an anonymous corpse, lies on the tarmac. Apparently it is a dog but it is hard to tell. The blonde woman trembles; she is in shock. Eventually, she puts on her sunglasses and starts driving again. Only then do we see the film's opening titles.⁵⁹ From then on, *La mujer sin cabeza* will engage the spectators in a journey of guilt, complicity and denial.

⁵⁷ In the original: 'Mi relación con el cine es absolutamente política. Fue la forma que encontré de estar presente en una comunidad y compartir. Construir mi propio discurso me resultó difícil. Avergonzada un poco de la clase social a la que pertenezco no podía tampoco ponerme a narrar desde un lugar del que no tengo ninguna experiencia de vida. Mi intento de solución es el que aparece en esta película' (my translation). My interview with Lucrecia Martel was conducted in Buenos Aires on 4 April 2009. Unless otherwise noted, all the quotes included here come from the same source.

⁵⁸ In the original: 'La palabra *Salta* nunca aparece en mis películas. Sería una traición. La realidad de Salta es siempre más compleja que mis películas', from the interview conducted by María Delgado after *La ciénaga*'s screening at the Discovering Latin American Film Festival in London, 3 December 2008.

⁵⁹ In 1995, a wealthy Argentine woman ran over a child who died immediately. The young woman left the scene without getting out of the car. After a questionable trial, the woman was sentenced to undertake light charity work.

Immediately after the accident, it is possible to see traces of little hands appearing at the window of the car as if they were trying to reach the woman's face. Presumably, they are the hands of the small children of Vero's friends and relatives, those who were playing in the car just before she began her journey back home; also the evidence of the ever-present childhood world that has been one of the main features of Martel's oeuvre. Or perhaps the hands refer to those *other* children, the poor, those who haunted the high road at the beginning of the film who nobody seemed to notice. In any case, isolated from any other environment, those little hands seem to be asking for help. They are hands falling from nowhere, sticking to the window as if it were the last opportunity to survive. These are hands that request responsibility, hands without a face. They are also the first material trace of the queer sense of temporality that inhabits the film. In the following sections, I will argue that Martel's film deals with the violence inflicted upon those who have become invisible, those that Butler calls the '*faceless*' and whose lives seem to have been relegated to a space beyond the human.⁶⁰ At first, these faceless seem to be quite different from the ones addressed by Prividera's film. They primarily point to those other marginal lives that inhabit the country during the democratic period. In fact, during our interview, the director referred to the social situation in her province:

The class subjugation in Salta has existed for 500 years and falls on the same families, above and below. I thought that this invisibility was already huge, and we got used to not seeing them.⁶¹

Drawing upon Martel's words, I will argue that *La mujer sin cabeza* attempts to find another way to 'see'.

Blonde and headless

Following the accident Vero is lost. She is docile and humble. Everything seems to be beyond her control. She looks like a girl lost in an adult world. Former familiar ties

⁶⁰ Butler, *Precaious Life*, p. xviii.

⁶¹ In the original: 'El sojuzgamiento de clases que hay en Salta lleva 500 años y cae sobre las mismas familias para arriba y para abajo. Me parecía que la invisibilidad era enorme, acomodarse a no ver ya era enorme' (my translation).

have now become senseless and Vero struggles to recognise her relatives among the confusing faces that pass by her lethargic, glazed eyes. The sense of disconnection in relation to the family bonds, so characteristic of Martel's films, is embodied by this blonde protagonist who wanders through her routines with an odd smile as if she were trapped inside a fish tank.⁶² The morning after the event, Vero finds herself in a taxi en route to her workplace, a dental surgery. There, rather than taking care of her patients she takes a seat in the waiting room. Vero's image, a startling blonde woman at the forefront of the first frame, is in stark contrast with these dark bodies that circulate in the background, at her place, in the streets, always in shadows, muttering like obscure creatures not yet human. Martel acknowledged this contrast:

When I was looking for an actor to be Vero, I realised that I needed a woman who would be obvious, of an evident size. I needed someone with a body that could not be avoided; someone blonde in a society of people who are mostly short and dark.⁶³

In fact, in the film the servants are literally out of focus. The audience is pervasively confronted with the murky and conspicuous employees constantly seen around upper class houses, satisfying orders, bringing pots, painting nails, cleaning bleeding animals, like buzzing insects not yet human. The effect is uncanny. For Vero, class frontiers, once so clear, seem to be impossible to grasp. Back at her sister's place, she is surprised to learn about her past life while watching the video of her wedding, which was attended by all the senators of the province. Meanwhile, Lala, her demented aunt, whispers from her bed: 'That voice doesn't seem to be yours'.⁶⁴ The old lady's comment becomes frightening if one considers that the question of falsified identities still haunts the aftermath of the dictatorship.⁶⁵

Eventually, Vero's confession comes: 'I have killed someone on the road,' she tells

⁶² Interviewed by Maria Delgado, during the 2008 Discovering Latin American Film Festival in London Martel accepted that the image of a fish tank was 'quite perfect' to address the particular atmosphere of her films (my notes).

⁶³ In the original: 'Cuando buscaba actriz para Vero me di cuenta de que necesitaba una mujer que fuera evidente, de tamaño evidente. Necesitaba un cuerpo que no se pudiera ocultar. Necesitaba alguien rubia en una sociedad de gente más bien baja y morena' (my translation).

⁶⁴ In the original: 'Esa voz no parece la tuya' (from the film).

⁶⁵ This is also argued by Maria Delgado in her review of the film, where she describes Lala as 'the mad woman in the attic'. See M. Delgado, 'The Headless Woman (2009)', *Sight & Sound* 20.3 (2010), p. 60.

her husband at the supermarket.⁶⁶ The man looks embarrassed. Reluctantly, he glances around searching for potential witnesses. Somehow, the couple makes their way back to the road, the scene of the crime. The husband instantly prompts: 'It is a dog. You got scared, it is a dog.'⁶⁷ 'I think I ran over someone,' Vero insists.⁶⁸ 'It is nothing, just a dog,' is the repeated, apathetic response.⁶⁹ No other words, just the same uttering that erases all responsibility.

The shameful dog

Throughout the film the spectator may involuntarily go back to the same question: was it really a dog that Vero ran over that day in the road, or was this just an improbable vision coming from another time? That preliminary scene will never be clear enough. The dog-like corpse on the tarmac seems to take the shape of fantasy or even the projection of Vero's husband's insistence. What does this mysterious figure stand for? I would like to suggest that after the accident Vero somehow embodied that dog. Following Alice Kuzniar's *Melancholia's Dog*, I suggest that Vero over-identified with that potential anonymous death. She went through a process of shameful retraction, which ultimately transformed her into a strange creature barely human, in some sense also headless. To some extent, she embodied the 'scenario of shame', one that eventually displaces the borders between human and non-human.⁷⁰ In fact, Kuzniar argues that the figure of the dog raises questions about what happens when family ties are not honoured and losses are not mourned. For her, mourning the dog could be also a way 'to insist on identifying and sharing with the otherwise despised and disowned.'⁷¹ Drawing on this, I would like to make the case that, by assuming the place of the injured, *La mujer sin cabeza* stands for a non-normative mode of kinship, one which points to other relationships that remain un-grievable in contemporary Argentina. In fact, the accident brought Vero closer to those shadowy servants. For once, she could perceive the distance among classes, a social abyss that also needs to be grieved. Furthermore, by embodying the dog, Vero was able to *see* differently. In

⁶⁶ In the original: 'Maté a alguien en la ruta' (from the film).

⁶⁷ In the original: 'Es un perro. Te asustaste, es un perro' (from the film).

⁶⁸ In the original: 'Creo que atropellé a alguien' (from the film).

⁶⁹ In the original: 'No es nada, es un perro' (from the film).

⁷⁰ Alice K. Kuzniar, *Melancholia's Dog. Reflections on our Animal Kinship* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p.179.

⁷¹ Kuzniar, *Melancholia's Dog*, p. 179.

this sense, the haunting figure of the dog also breaks normative silences; it proposes another tie with the *faceless*, bringing new forms of intimacy to light.

Nonetheless, those potentialities are eventually thwarted. Following the confession, the circle of complicities gets expanded. The men of the family, a syndicate of patriarchal kinship, seem to know exactly how to take care of the ‘situation’. From then on, the public witnesses Vero re-apprehending the world. Class barriers are recovered, and everyday routines seem to fit once again. However, strange facts keep unfolding in the film. Something smells bad. Not just the muddy waters of the canal where a human body has been found. There is something weird buried in the garden. Dead animals have drowned in the new swimming pool of the village. Children come knocking at the door asking for food. There is a close but still unimagined marginal area from where it is difficult to escape. There are no traces of the anonymous body, no traces of Vero’s medical exam or the secret sexual encounter with her cousin’s husband after the accident. By the end of the film, there are new flowers in the garden. The smashed car has been fixed. Vero is not blonde any more. She sports new, dark hair that suits her ‘so nicely’, as the relatives repeat. In the outmoded grounds of a provincial wealthy society, everything seems to be organised as if nothing had happened: the perfect fortress.

‘Nothing has happened’

Nothing happened: the muted tag-line of Martel’s film seems to contradict the collective plea that Argentine society raised after the end of the dictatorship: *Nunca más* (‘Never Again’). Still, times have changed: memory is now a question of state. I suggest that *La mujer sin cabeza* responds to this official context through a peculiar operation. It proposes an ex-temporal immersion within feelings of complicity, guilt and denial unleashed by the era of terror, which still resonates beyond the official narratives. In fact, the whole atmosphere of the film evokes the military period. A cheesy version of *Mammy Blue* written by Julio Iglesias and sung by Demis Roussos, the soundtrack of the military era, keeps playing after the titles. In this way, Martel’s film elusively iterates the uncomfortable script of the complicity, the plot that everybody knew and nobody could tell. If in Carri and Prividera’s films the experience of violence remained attached to an uncanny relation with the past, *La*

mujer sin cabeza tests the contours of these feelings in the contemporary context of a marginal province. Moreover, it suggests that the old dictatorial mechanisms can be iterated in the present. ‘We live in a society of castes’, stated Martel in 2008.⁷² In fact, *La mujer sin cabeza* offers the amplified scene of an asphyxiating social silence. In so doing, it tests the extent to which public culture has effectively stepped outside complicity. By delivering an uncanny mixture of silence, guilt and shame, the film holds the audience tightly, and whispers: *Do you want to be complicit too?*

The exception

La mujer sin cabeza proffers one exception within this patriarchal machinery of silence: Candita. Vero’s thirteen-year-old niece is in love with her aunt. She has written a confessional letter to her and has got no answer. ‘Love letters should be returned or responded to,’ says the girl.⁷³ Indeed, Candita is the distinctive figure of the film. Apart from Vero’s transitory moment of ‘nonsense’, she is the only character that suggests how the structure of denial might be reversed. She is also the only one who engages with the *faceless* in modes that go beyond commands and abuse. She has friends who come from the marginal areas of the town. Candita crosses borders. Maybe as a secret punishment she is also sick. She suffers from a chronic hepatitis, which makes her indeed of a different *colour*.

Certainly, Candita’s figure stresses the non-normative ingredients attributed to queer romance. In this context, Martel’s inclination to dis-establish family ties could also be read as a challenge of the bloodline ownership of the experience of grief. While breaking with normative structures, Candita also rethinks the figure of the ‘wounded family’ that dominates the post-dictatorship scene. She shows that other social arrangements are also possible. During our interview, Martel acknowledged this tension that furtively underlies her film:

The family as institution, as long as we have known it, is the basis of all corruption. It involves a form of loyalty, which is inspired by blood

⁷² In the original: ‘Vivimos en una sociedad de castas’. See Leonardo D’Espósito, ‘Los noventa son el plan maestro de la dictadura’, *Crítica de la Argentina*, 20 August 2008, <http://criticadigital.com/index.php?secc=nota&nid=9423> [accessed 24 October 2009]

⁷³ In the original: ‘Las cartas de amor deben ser devueltas o respondidas’ (from the film).

instead of affinities of thought [...]. Blood and property are basic forms of defence. [...] If one could identify less with the family, then the sense of belonging to a community would be stronger, and to run over someone, to let someone suffer, or to live without education could be real problems.⁷⁴

Drawing on this, I suggest that Martel's critique of biological ties also engages with other forms of community explored in Carri's and Prividera's films. Ultimately, her film suggests that the resonances of grief not only surpass boundaries of class but also draw upon spectral communities across time, as I will now examine.

Grievable lives and deaths

A popular Argentine tale says that when someone gets a fright, the body remains without a soul, like a dead person who is nonetheless alive. *La mujer sin cabeza* seems to be full of these kinds of spectres. In an early scene, Lala, Vero's aunt, who is apparently dying, whispers from her bed: 'The house is full of ghosts. If you don't look at them, they just go away'.⁷⁵ There is something imperative in the words of the old woman that suggest a strange temporality. Not only has Vero become an un-quiet *zombie*, but the murky employees of the house have been neglected to the point where they are almost invisible. More than this, there are other spectres in the film, eerie presences that come from the past and, like the anonymous corpse on the high road, did not receive a burial. Indeed, the film suggests that the figure of the disappeared is still encrypted in the current *faceless*, circulating, emerging from different states of humanity. Those vanished lives have mutated and now embody the marginalised lives, those of the servants, which are muddy as they cannot be seen. The first spectres reverberate with the others and back and forth. They are both *faceless*, lives that have fallen outside the human.

I would like to suggest that Martel's film builds an anachronistic coalition, which reminds of 'the desire of bodies to touch across times' that Carolyn Dinshaw explores

⁷⁴ In the original: 'La familia como institución tal como la conocemos es la base de toda corrupción. Supone una forma de lealtad que está inspirada en la sangre en lugar de otras afinidades de pensamiento. La sangre y la propiedad son formas básicas de defensa [...]. Si uno se identificara menos con la familia entonces el sentido de pertenencia a una comunidad sería más fuerte, y atropellar a alguien, o dejar que alguien sufra o sin educación serían problemas reales' (my translation).

⁷⁵ In the original: 'Esta casa está llena de fantasmas. Si no los mirás se van' (from the film).

in her scholarship on communities and queer sexualities.⁷⁶ In fact, in Martel's film, the dead seem to gaze at the living through the shadowy figures of the now excluded. These spectres intersect with the figure of the dog, that improbable creature, not dead, not living, which circulates throughout the film as if appearing from the past or even from future. This uncanny entanglement of times is what gives *La mujer sin cabeza* its most singular power.

Indeed, the eerie tensions that circulate throughout the film also invite a dialogue with Prividera's piece. While in *M* the figure of the *faceless* worked as a denunciation of the hierarchies inside the disappeared, Martel's film pushes this problem further to address the new *faceless*, those who live in the edges and endorse the profound hierarchy of lives that haunts current democratic times. Martel's masterful use of local vernacular, sometimes deliberately racist and ironically stressed, helps to address the polished and xenophobic manner of the wealthy landowners and the subtle textures of a patriarchal structure in which things do not seem to have changed in 30 years. The director referred to this during our interview:

What used to be a gap among classes is now an abyss. If you get on a train to the west [Buenos Aires' poorest area] the people you can see there are very different from those who come from this side, with our nurturing creams, hair conditioners, and low-fat food. Humanity mutates through social layers. In some of them, if you get dengue you have four days of fever, in others you just die.⁷⁷

I want to suggest that Martel's film responds to this imbalanced regime that determines whose lives can be seen and whose must remain invisible. If the Kirchnerist period imposed an official grieving for the vanished lives left by the dictatorship, *La mujer sin cabeza* reminds its viewers of more silent forms of violence. It shows how loud forms of public grief may also hide other forms of social

⁷⁶ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 3.

⁷⁷ In the original: 'Lo que antes era una brecha ahora es un abismo entre clases. Si te subís en un tren que va al oeste, la gente que ves ahí es rarísima, para lo que somos los de este lado con crema humectante y un desenredante de pelo, alimentación sin grasas saturadas. La humanidad va mutando por capas. En algunas de esas capas, si te pica el dengue te dan cuatro días de fiebre, en otra te morís' (my translation).

injustice. In so doing, Martel's film raises an ethical demand that urges the spectators to revise whose lives count as real, and even how reality might be remade. In fact, the differential physical constitutions that Martel addresses, both through her film and during the interview, speak of that unequal morphology that haunts the present. These forms of vulnerability also engage with the legacies left by the military violence. *La mujer sin cabeza* shows how the first cannot be grasped without the other.

Uncanny blondes

La mujer sin cabeza also invites a dialogue with *Los Rubios*. Once again, the bridge between both films takes the texture of a hair colour: *blondeness*. Both films ironically prompt the idea of *cabecitas negras* (the 'black heads'), which, as already argued, refers to Argentine less privileged population. By presenting two different versions of deviant blondes, both films invoke a sign of class that becomes displaced and eventually queered. While the blonde wigs in *Los Rubios* envisage the emergence of a non-biological community in mourning, Martel presents an artificial blonde that has mutated into dark hair, as a sort of impossible redemption for someone who seeks to be absolved of guilt. Moreover, in both films blondeness appears as a costume that might be eventually exchanged.

I have argued that by embodying guilt, *La mujer sin cabeza* performs a counter-narrative of mourning where each spectator becomes witness and is thereby subtly compelled to respond. In so doing, it offers a frightening mirror in response to past violence and its various mutations in the present time. Martel's film also shows how there is still a chance to reverse the path of complicity and silence. In one of the last scenes, Vero passes through a door to meet her relatives. Instead of following her, the camera remains outside. In this way, the scene positions the director outside the fortress of denial. That minor scene confirms Martel's cinema as primarily political. Amid this terrain, the director's shameful feelings of class become a powerful form of critique.

Close

In this chapter, I have proposed a dialogue among three different films. Taken

together, these films show how the dictatorship has not only inspired melancholic and painful remembrances, but also a wide collection of public feelings that include shame, anger, guilt and laughter. In the first place, I have argued that *Los Rubios* offers a creative and playful response to the crisis of kinship inaugurated by loss. The final image of the crew wearing blonde wigs works as a visionary dream, which envisages an embryonic lineage that is still in a process of emergence in Argentina. *Los Rubios*' spectral community reconfigures the idea of family by suggesting that kinship is not only marked by blood but rather by the pain and pleasure of a shared mourning. The analysis of *M* has complicated the scenario. Prividera's film contests the comfortable position that the relatives have achieved during the Kirchnerist period. By addressing a hierarchy of lives among the disappeared, *M* suggests an almost indigestible possibility for the current governments: not all the murders carried out by the military regime count in the same way. Finally, I have brought into play Martel's film to show how past and present furtively 'touch' each other. *La mujer sin cabeza* suggests that subtle mechanisms of denial are still at work in contemporary times. Under non-comparable forms of exclusion, the military violence appears iterated in the democratic period to the extent that certain lives have become invisible. In this sense, the current *faceless* remain haunted by the eyes of the past 'unburied'.

I have brought these films into consideration ultimately tempted by the particular encounter that they propose with their viewers. They do not merely solicit a passive watching but rather they enact a pervasive demand upon their spectators. Against official politics of remembering, these films expose how memory is not tied to the fixed temporality of duty, but rather to untidy narratives that begin again and again through uncertain experiences of body-to-body transmission. Although this machinery is not linear but breaks, slips and flows into precarious and always unforeseen results, I contend that these films might contribute to reinforce a forthcoming culture of mourning. In doing so, they also suggest alternative ways of inhabiting the future.

Cooking in Hell: The Conversion of ESMA's Former Detention Camp

Introduction

17 April 2009. The streets of the former *Escuela Mecánica de la Armada* (Navy School of Mechanics, ESMA) are quiet. What used to be the main clandestine detention camp in Argentina has become a seemingly peaceful place in one of the richest areas of Buenos Aires. Grass grows wildly all around. Birds are singing. It is hard to believe that 5,500 people were arrested and tortured here. In 2004, when ESMA was 'recovered' for civil society, the former camp was declared a 'Space of Memory'. I walk through the premises towards the former Liceo Naval Militar, the building that used to host the military school during the dictatorship. There, on 31 January 2008, the Association of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo opened the cultural centre '*Nuestros Hijos*' ('Our Children'). Now there is a group of people gathering at the entrance. Someone mentions that the session 'Cooking and Politics' is about to begin; I join the queue and eventually I am led into a big room. School desks are placed in rows like in a classroom and at the front there is a kitchen. A professional oven is set alongside a big fridge next to a fully fitted cooker with a gas stove. Flowers, saucepans, big spoons, plastic glasses of different colours complete the scene. 'Activist food' is written on the blackboard.¹ Around 30 people sit at the desks, greeting each other and chatting. The group is heterogeneous: mostly middle-aged men and women, but there are also a few older people and youngsters; some of them look like foreigners.

At about 5:15 pm Hebe de Bonafini arrives. She is the most famous of the *Madres*. She started calling for the 'alive appearance' of her two missing sons in 1977 and continues to do so today. Since the original group split in 1986, Bonafini has been the leader of the radical faction. She is big and tall and doesn't look her 81 years. Instead of the white scarf, the symbol of the *Madres*' fight for more than 30 years, she wears an apron. It has Che Guevara's face on it. 'Today we are preparing Mexican food',

¹ In the original: 'Comida combativa' (my translation).

she announces while proceeding to take her place in front of the kitchen. While Bonafini cooks, the audience debates political affairs and exchanges recipes. Attendance is open and free. At the end of the session, they all eat and drink together.

While attending these sessions many times, I had the feeling that something unusual was taking place at the former detention camp, something that largely exceeded the official discourses of memory supported by the Kirchnerist administration. Drawing upon this, in this chapter I will make the case that a new community is created at that kitchen, one that combines the family rituals around the dinner table and the collective affects involved in the process of grief. In opposition to arguments that tend to consider ESMA as a dreadful hiatus of horror, I will show how the cooking sessions may suggest a new conviviality in a former site of death. In order to do so, I will engage with critical work in performance studies, mainly an issue ‘On Cooking’ published in *Performance Research*, to frame the cooking sessions as food performances. In addition, I will draw on Nicholas Ridout’s work on ‘staging the real’ to explore how the gastronomic gatherings may propose a politics of the conversion of the former camp. This analysis will also include an interview that I conducted with Bonafini, in which we discussed her long-term activism in relation to the different family tables that she hosted during her life. I will also read ESMA’s food gatherings alongside the work developed by the British artist Bobby Baker, who has explored issues of gender and domesticity through her series of experimental performances. Ultimately, I will make the case that the cooking sessions queer the table of victims by proposing a collective ‘digestion’ of mourning and making it *palatable* for new audiences.

An ongoing debate

Among all the symbols of the dictatorship, ESMA is the most infamous. The military school functioned as the largest of the 340 Clandestine Detention and Assassination Camps (CDD) operating in the country during the period.² When democracy returned, ESMA remained as an icon of violence and trauma encrypted in the middle of the

² Today, the CDD are under the responsibility of the Instituto Espacio para la Memoria, which works at ESMA, and has undertaken a politics of recuperation of the spaces. See <http://www.institutomemoria.org.ar/exccd/esma.html> [accessed 2 August 2011]

city. Held in outrageous conditions of imprisonment, which included hoods, chains and handcuffs, mainly leftist militants were exposed to extensive sessions of torture at the *Casino de Oficiales* (Officers' Casino). This often led to the so-called *vuelos de la muerte* ('flights of death') during which the inmates were drugged and thrown into the *Río de la Plata* (La Plata river). The unit of torture also had a clandestine maternity ward operating in the basement; 500 babies were born there and were stolen by the military and their associated networks.

On 24 March 2004 the recently elected President Néstor Kirchner removed the portraits of the commandants of the Military Junta from the walls of the main building. As mentioned in the Introduction, this gesture marked the official transference of the iconic space to civilians (p. 23). In front of a crowd that had broken into the premises, Kirchner apologised in the name of the State for '20 years of silence' and promised to convert the navy school into a 'Space of Memory'.³ When in 2006 the re-opening of the trials investigating the human rights violations became effective, ESMA achieved the status of a '*mega-causa*' ('mega law-suit'). The judicial investigation brought to court 19 military repressors accused of the abduction, torture, and execution of 88 people in the former detention camp. Following the complete eviction of the premises in September 2007, a brand new jurisdictional institution -*El Ente*- was created to decide on the fate of that uncomfortable place comprising 40 acres and 35 buildings, by then empty and almost in ruins.

Following the transferral in 2004, a fiery debate begun. The relatives' associations, human rights groups, NGOs, authorities of the city and the national government could not agree whether ESMA should be closed, converted into a museum or demolished.⁴ The administration of the city opened a public contest inviting different sectors of the civil society to propose how to reoccupy the space.⁵ Although it is not my purpose to evaluate the content of these projects here, as Jens Andermann addresses, three main

³ Guillermo dos Santos Coelho, 'Kirchener inauguró el Mueso en la ESMA y pidió perdón en nombre del Estado', *Clarín*, 24 March 2004, <http://edant.clarin.com/diario/2004/03/24/um/m-730116.htm> [accessed 10 August 2011]

⁴ In 1998, a judicial decision, following the intervention of human rights' associations, prevented ESMA from being demolished. See Horacio Verbistky, 'La ESMA es del pueblo', *Página 12*, 17 October 1998, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/1998/98-10/98-10-17/pag03.htm> [accessed 10 August 2011]

⁵ The consideration of the proposals was entrusted to the *Instituto Nacional de la Memoria*, <http://www.institutomemoria.org.ar/exccd/esma.html> [accessed 2 August 2011]

positions were delineated: the *testimonial*, which takes the entire site as ‘unalterable heritage’; the *museal*, which argues for the ‘pedagogical functions’ of the space; and the *performative*, which sustains that only by ‘handing over’ the place to ‘future-oriented artistic and political activities can this space be wrested from death and its executioners.’⁶ As I will explore further, Bonafini’s cooking sessions provide an exemplary case of the *performative* option. After years of heated debates, the official dream of transforming the place into a ‘Human Rights City’ has become more tangible. In an unintentional way, the former camp now witnesses a peculiar combination of the three aforementioned positions. In fact, the former Navy School hosts national offices, archives, and there are free guiding-tours to the *Casino de Oficiales*, the former unit of tortures, which has been preserved empty and mostly untouched.⁷ In the same premises, the refurbished centre ‘Haroldo Conti’ has become a key space for memory events. Overcoming their original reluctance, some of the associations of the relatives, such as H.I.J.O.S. and the *Abuelas*, have followed Bonafini’s pioneer occupation and have moved their headquarters to the contested premises. Since the final eviction, the former camp has hosted international workshops, art exhibitions, book launches, concerts, theatre and cinema events, and even the harvest of potatoes.⁸

The strange conviviality among these disparate activities has transformed ESMA into an experimental site of mourning. The transitional period of the former camp has been thoughtfully documented by Jonathan Perel’s film *El predio* (The Lot, 2010).⁹ There are no voices in the film, just ambient noise. The camera ghostly travels around the premises shedding light on seemingly insignificant details and unattended contrasts. Images stand by themselves. Silence accounts for what is missing. My choice has been different. This chapter focuses on the loud, messy and largely undocumented

⁶ See Jens Andermann, ‘Returning to the Site of Horror: The Recovery of Clandestine Concentration Camps in Argentina’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 29.1 (2012, forthcoming), n.p.

⁷ In fact, former inmates and survivors contended that the *entire* premises of the former camp should be preserved as the untouched testimony of state terrorism. The proposal of the *Asociación Ex-Detenidos Desaparecidos* (Association of Former Detainee-Disappeared) can be found here: <http://www.exdesaparecidos.org.ar/propuestaesmaaedd.htm> [accessed 2 August 2011]

⁸ The potatoes’ initiative ‘Cosechar-Multiplicar’ (‘Harvest-Multiply’) was an artistic project conducted by Marina Etchegoyhen between October 2009 and February 2010 at the *Madres* cultural center ECUNHI. See <http://www.marinaetchegoyhen.blogspot.com/> [accessed 11 December 2011]

⁹ The film was screened in London as part of a symposium on Memory and Latin America, which I co-organised at the Institute of the Studies for the Americas (23-24 October 2010).

cooking sessions pioneered by Bonafini at the former *Liceo Militar*. I suggest that the combination of food and activism witnessed at these venues opens up productive questions regarding a forthcoming politics of mourning. Moreover, I contend that the precarious kitchen located at the former camp ultimately addresses a fundamental inquiry: whether or not, and in which terms, a former site of death can overcome its tragic past.

From the centre of death to a centre of life

On 17 April 2009 I interviewed Bonafini at *La casa de las Madres* (The House of the Mothers), an old building located in front of *Congreso*, where the Argentine parliament sits. The place hosts the University of *Madres*, a cafeteria and a bookstore. It also has a space for the Foundation *Nuestros Sueños* ('Our Dreams'), a social enterprise run by the *Madres* dedicated to constructing low-budget homes for vulnerable groups around the country. As I will discuss later in this chapter, in July 2011 a major scandal seized this institution: Sergio Schoklender, the commissioner of the Foundation, and Bonafini's right-hand aid, was accused of using public funds for personal enrichment. In 2009, when I conducted the interview, Bonafini was in a good mood. This is how she recalled the first time she visited ESMA in January 2007:

I do not know if it was just me, but the place was chilly. It was summer, but you could feel shivers of ice running down your spine. The military had taken everything; they are thieves! But soon I figured out all the things that the *Madres* could do there.¹⁰

From the start, I was interested in Bonafini's relating the former camp to a form of *doing*; it already suggested the possibility of reversing ESMA's charged atmosphere through a form of practice. This perspective contrasted with that of former political prisoners and their relatives who resisted any kind of institutional activity on the

¹⁰ In the original: 'No sé si a mí me pareció, o realmente era un lugar helado. Era verano pero te corre el hielo y el frío por el cuerpo. Se habían llevado todo, de basuras que son para robar. Después yo ya me imagine todas las cosas que podíamos hacer las Madres ahí adentro' (my translation). The interview with Hebe de Bonafini was conducted on 19 April 2009 at the *Madres'* House in Buenos Aires. All the quotes included in this chapter belong to the same talk.

premises and wanted to preserve the place as the ‘material testimony of genocide’.¹¹
The Mother went further:

When the organisations started arguing about transforming ESMA into a museum, I was against it. I have been in Auschwitz and all I saw was a huge horror: it is a place where you can go once but you will never return. I didn’t want to turn ESMA into a place where people just wanted to go once. I thought that we had to make a place where people could stay, a place where life wins over death. We had to transform ESMA into a space for life.¹²

I was surprised. In opposition to the reification of horror that she claimed to have witnessed in Auschwitz, Bonafini argued that ESMA should not be reduced to the mere landscape of horror. While prestigious scholars spoke of an ultimate ‘irrecoverability’ of the former camp, the 81-year old Mother proposed to transform those ‘bad feelings’ into a source of affirmative power, something that in her words appeared articulated as ‘life’.¹³ I suggest that Bonafini’s discourse introduced an alternative path for conceiving mourning, one that can be understood as a ‘politics of conversion’.

Some contemporary theorists have resisted the idea of conversion to define the task of politics. For instance, while discussing the feelings of melancholic immigrants, Sara Ahmed argues against those who think that painful experiences can be simply overcome. She contends that this position finally envisions the bodies of these individuals who cannot forget as a ‘conversion point’.¹⁴ Politics, for her, should not be conceived of as a conversion. Although Ahmed’s perspective builds a fascinating critique of neo-liberal discourses of happiness, I want to suggest that conversion does

¹¹ In the original: ‘testimonio material del genocidio’ (my translation). I am referring again to the project of the *Asociación de Ex-Detenidos Desaparecidos* (AEDD).

¹² In the original: ‘Cuando las organizaciones empezaron a discutir que querían hacer un museo, yo estuve en contra. Estuve en Auschwitz y lo que vi fue el horror más terrible. No quiero hacer un lugar donde la gente quiera ir una sola vez. Tenemos que hacer un lugar donde la vida le gane a la muerte. Tenemos que transformar ESMA en un espacio para la vida’ (my translation).

¹³ This is, for instance, the position of the Argentine philosopher Alejandro Kaufman, which Andermann defines as a ‘radical testimonialism’ and finally accounts for the ‘irrecoverability’ of ESMA. See J. Anderman, ‘Returning to the Site of Horror: The Recovery of Clandestine Concentration Camps in Argentina’, n.p. (forthcoming).

¹⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 148.

not necessary imply reconciliation or leaving the past behind. In this vein, I will suggest that a politics of conversion can also be conceived as a form of rehearsing trauma in the present. In fact, Mick Duggan and Patrick Wallis address this possibility of considering performance as a way to ‘work through’ painful resonances of the past.¹⁵ Drawing on a productive encounter between trauma and performance studies, in the following pages, I will consider Bonafini’s proposal for converting ESMA alongside her Catholic background.

Faithful to her defiant style, at the height of the disputes with other association of the relatives and survivors, the Mother eventually stopped attending the official meetings hosted by the national government:

I told President Kirchner, “Look, I don’t want to come to these meetings anymore. Everybody says what they want to do, which are the places they want to have, and how big their offices should be, but I am not interested in that. I want the *Liceo Naval Militar*: this was the place where the military were taught how to kill, rape and torture. We have to show that in this place we can do something different. We have to show that we can transform ESMA into a centre of life”.¹⁶

With the official blessing of the President, the Mother proceeded to occupy the targeted building: the *Liceo Naval* – where the ideology of the navy was reproduced among the military candidates. When the rest of the premises were in ruins, the cultural centre began to offer concerts, art exhibitions and a variety of workshops. To some extent, Bonafini envisioned her strategy as pedagogical, even contagious. This is particularly provocative when considering the focus of this chapter: a basic activity that takes place in most domestic spaces: cooking.

Cooking to convert

¹⁵ Mick Wallis and Patrick Duggan, ‘On Trauma’, *Performance Research*, 16.1 (2011), 1-3 (p. 2).

¹⁶ In the original: ‘Así lo pensé, así lo hablé con las Madres, y así se lo pedí a Kirchner. Yo le dije “mire, no quiero venir mas a las reuniones. Todo el mundo discute lo que quiere, que lugar quieren, cuanto va a ser de grande, no me interesa. Yo quiero el Liceo Naval Militar, porque es ahí donde se dieron las clases, donde se enseñó a matar, a violar, a torturar. Tenemos que demostrar que en ese mismo lugar podemos hacer otra cosa. Tenemos que mostrar transformar la Esma en un centro de vida”’ (my translation).

As far as I could witness at the Tuesday gatherings, part of the *Madre*'s intentions were realised. The cooking sessions managed to transform the former military school into an open space where ordinary people gathered to combine political discussion with practical food recipes. The presence of a brand-new kitchen at ESMA suggested an alternative religion, almost a secular Eucharist. As I will soon expand, the process of sharing food proposed a non-biological mode for the transmission of trauma: an experience of food-conversion. That Tuesday Bonafini stood in the middle of the classroom. She mixed the ingredients in a big saucepan. Her preaching did not stop: 'Today we are preparing 30 portions of Mexican food for 37 pesos [around 6 pounds]. See how many healthy meals can be prepared with so little money!'¹⁷ Everybody in the room called her *Madre* ('Mother'). As with the filigrees in church, Bonafini asked the audience to contribute 1 peso for the handouts (£0.16). The tithe was worth paying. Less traditional than bread and wine, the handouts included low-budget recipes for guacamole, tabule, empanadas, pizza and lentil bread. At the bottom, all pages bore a name: 'Hebe'. To some extent, the Mother's signature appeared to endorse certain feelings of ownership over the ingredients of a healthy digestion of grief.

During the hourly session, Bonafini could be cheerful, authoritarian or proud of her Catholic background, but always pleased to grab the attention of the audience. While the food was prepared and the political chat continued, she indulged the audience with anecdotes of the *Madres* touring conferences abroad, or with gossip about Evo Morales, Bolivia's President, one of her closest friends. The cooking session also included a session of close reading. Far from the Bible or even any cookery book, one of Bonafini's favourite psalms was Eva Perón's autobiography *La razón de mi vida* ('The Reason of My Life', 1952). Although Perón's first wife has been a mythical figure within subsequent Peronist governments, Fernández de Kirchner's administration transformed her public persona into a new idiosyncratic icon of female power.¹⁸ Still, I was surprised to notice the passage that Bonafini selected to share

¹⁷ In the original: 'Hoy vamos a preparar 30 platos de comida mejicana por 37 pesos. Miren cuánta comida sana se puede cocinar por tan poca plata' (my translation).

¹⁸ To commemorate the 59th anniversary of Eva Perón's death, on 26 July 2011 two gigantic metallic portraits were placed on both sides of the building that hosts the Ministry of Social Development, a key mark in Buenos Aires' landscape. The artists, Daniel Santoro and Alejandro Marmo, worked under the

with her audience. The Mother read aloud: ‘Fanaticism is the only way to conquer death. I am a fanatic of my people. I will die for them, in front of the capitalist imperialism, with or without weapons’.¹⁹ Like a minister in church, Bonafini interpreted *Evita*’s sacred word in line with her own activism: ‘They have said that the *Madres* are fanatics. And yes, I am a fanatic in what I do.’²⁰ The vindication of a certain form of rhetorical violence was at least disturbing, especially considering that it took place inside a kitchen. To some extent, Bonafini seemed to be echoing H.I.J.O.S.’ re-edition of the radical liturgies that used to dominate their parents’ activism during the 1970s, as analysed in Chapter 1. Watching Bonafini dominating ESMA’s kitchen, I had the feeling that her performance created the collective scene for a ritualistic incorporation and digestion of mourning. First, I would like to show how the Mother’s attempts to convert the former detention camp could be read in parallel with her transformation as public persona.

New outfits for a rebel

Even during the dictatorship, Bonafini built her political career by claiming the impossible, the ‘alive appearance’ of the 30,000 disappeared. As considered in the Introduction, when the first mass graves with the remains of the missing were found in the early 1980s, Bonafini remained faithful to her original claim. In her stubborn political discourse, the appraisal of reality was not a priority. For decades, the Mother has hampered military and democratic administrations with a pervasive practice of disobedience. By the mid-1990s when the government offered reparations to the relatives, she complained against the associations that accepted that money by arguing: ‘It’s disgusting that anyone can think of setting a price on the lives of our 30,000 disappeared.’²¹ Her tone, or maybe the ‘taste’ of her political elections, was always harsh, always unpredictable. Within the global arena, Bonafini celebrated the Twin Towers’ attack arguing that for the first time the USA received an ‘invoice’ for

direct supervision of the President Fernández de Kirchner.

¹⁹ In the original: ‘El fanatismo es la única manera de vencer a la muerte. Yo soy fanática de mi pueblo. Moriría por él, frente al capitalismo o al imperialismo, con o sin armas’.

²⁰ In the original: ‘Algunos dicen que las Madres son fanáticas. Y sí, yo soy fanática de lo que hago’ (my translation).

²¹ In the original: ‘Nos da asco que alguien piense en cobrar y le ponga precio a la vida de nuestros 30,000 desaparecidos’. By that time, she also argued that the reparative funds involved between US\$90 and 250,000 per disappeared son. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38fXKYQXB9I&feature=share> [accessed 5 June 2011]

the actions performed during their history.²² In the human rights field, Bonafini's figure has been publicly tolerated but always difficult to digest.

It was only after Nestor Kirchner took power in 2003 that Bonafini began her process of conversion. After years of fighting against the state, she gained a special shield within the Kirchnerist period. These administrations, which adopted the flags of the victims, also transformed the defiant Mother into a protected figure. In return, she became one of the main ambassadors of the new era of memory. During the cooking sessions at ESMA, Bonafini swears, jokes, pokes fun at most of the political figures, but she always refers to the President as 'Cristina'. Before her eyes, the presidential couple became the unquestionable Popes of her controversial lineage. In their perspective, Bonafini's 'rehabilitation' proved their solid commitment to human rights. Even so, the Mother's food-performance at ESMA cannot easily be assimilated within normative scripts of mourning. To some extent, she became the 'housekeeper' of ESMA – and in so doing, she offered an alternative way of dealing with the incorporation of trauma.

ESMA's housekeeper

When I first heard a colleague referring to Bonafini as ESMA's housekeeper, I was instantly curious. The expression not only made ironic reference to the institutionalization of the Mother's role during the Kirchner era but it also acknowledged the peculiar rehearsal of gender roles that took place at her brand new kitchen. I would like to examine this figure in dialogue with the 'bad script' addressed by Diana Taylor while analysing the *Madres'* rounds at the central square. In Taylor's perspective, although the group of women contested the military regime, 'they left a restrictive patriarchal system basically unchallenged'.²³ Although I have responded to Taylor's analysis in the Introduction (pp. 20-21) and elsewhere, here I would like to explore how this seemingly 'bad script' was displaced at the cooking sessions.²⁴

²² In the original: 'Por primera vez le pasaron la boleta a Estados Unidos por lo que hizo durante toda su vida'. See 'Polémicas declaraciones de Hebe de Bonafini', *La Nación*, 10 October 2001, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/341895-polemicas-declaraciones-de-bonafini> [accessed 11 November 2011]

²³ Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 191.

²⁴ For an expanded critique of Taylor's argument, see C. Sosa, 'On Mothers and *Spiders*: A Face-to-

While considering the kitchen as her new space for activism during the interview, Bonafini's response was direct:

I don't have any academic background. I just needed to find a place where I could feel comfortable, that was close to me, and this was the kitchen. I always thought that the kitchen is pure life.²⁵

Despite the Mother's seemingly 'patriarchal' script, I would like to suggest that the way in which she brought the 'women's world' into play during the cooking lessons at ESMA introduced a crucial disruption in the skills usually associated with the housewife. In fact, her intervention seems to mock common understandings of human rights' activism. It is a response to the attempts at the reification of horror, which comes from a terrain unexplored by memory scholars: the kitchen. During the interview, I wanted to explore whether this initiative could be read in tune with her experience at the family table.

Indeed, Bonafini comes from a very traditional background. She was born in 1928 in *El Dique*, a little village next to an oil refinery in the province of Buenos Aires. The biggest industry of the village was a modest factory where her father was employed. In her working class Catholic family, there were little doubts about who should be in the kitchen: 'The one who cooked at home was always my mother. She taught me how to do it since I was a child.'²⁶ In fact, the first apron that Bonafini used at ESMA had her mother's name, Pepa, printed on it. This is how she recalled her childhood times:

My mother cooked a lot of *puchero* [a cheap stew] and also soups; simple and humble food [...] and the snacks! All morning I chopped fennel to feed the rabbits. We also chopped spinach, and chard that is very nice. We sometimes had *milanesa* [schnitzels], but not so much meat. We bred rabbits, chickens, and my grandmother built a pond, and we had ducks.

Face Encounter with Argentina's Mourning', *Memory Studies*, 4.3 (2011) 63-72.

²⁵ In the original: 'No tengo ninguna preparación académica, tenía que buscar un lugar que yo pudiera estar, que tuviera que ver conmigo y ese lugar es la cocina' (my translation).

²⁶ In the original: 'En mi casa cocinaba mi mamá. Desde muy chiquita me enseñó a cocinar a mí' (my translation).

We had eggs of all sorts. We ate all this.²⁷

Bonafini did not recall having a favourite meal. 'I liked eating a lot. I ate my food and also what my brother left. I ate everything,' she told me with a smile.²⁸ I could not avoid picturing the *Madre* transformed into a girl enthusiastically eating, storing energy for future fights. Nonetheless, back then, her family did not discuss politics at the table. Bonafini only recalled modest and peaceful evenings until the Peronist movement began developing in the early 1940s. Then the first political quarrels began:

My father was Radical [from the Radical party] and my brother was Peronist and they used to argue a lot. For many years, we couldn't talk about politics at all. But I knew that my dad painted the walls of the neighbourhood for electoral propaganda. In our backyard there was a container where he prepared the paste. Kids always know.²⁹

Maybe those hushed divisions in her family prepared Bonafini to deal with disagreement. They might also make her aware of the strange 'secrets' that circulate around family tables. Bonafini got married young. She was only 14 when her husband built the first house at the back of her mother's place. She gave birth to three children; Jorge, Raúl, and Alejandra; the first two were to 'disappear'. Years before the military regime, the family moved to La Plata, a university city in the province of Buenos Aires: 'This was precisely because I wanted to preserve the upbringing of my children. I wanted them to study and to bring their friends home'.³⁰ Bonafini also recalled those times in that kitchen:

²⁷ In the original: 'Mi mamá hacía mucho puchero, mucha sopa, comida humilde. Todas las mañanas me iba a cortaba inojo para los conejos. Y de paso cortábamos acelga, cardo, que es muy rico. Algunas milanesas, carne poco. Criábamos conejos, pollos, gallinas y mi abuela había hecho un estanque con patos. huevos de todo tipo, comíamos eso' (my translation)

²⁸ In the original: 'Me gustaba mucho comer, me comía lo mío y lo que dejaba mi hermano. No tenía problemas con nada' (my translation).

²⁹ In the original: 'Mi papá era radical y mi hermano peronista así que se discutía mucho. En realidad, por muchos años no se habló de política en la cocina para nada. Yo sabía que mi papá iba a pintar las paredes del barrio para hacer propaganda. En el fondo de la casa había un tacho donde se preparaba el engrudo. Uno era chico y sabía' (my translation).

³⁰ In the original: 'Justamente por querer preservar la crianza de mis hijos, que estudiaran, que vinieran con los amigos a casa' (my translation).

Raúl, my youngest son, was very cheerful. He made me dance a *chamamé* [folkloric music] while I was frying chips or *milanesa* and made me ruin all the food. I never got upset. I have such good memories at the kitchen. Kitchen always has to do with love.³¹

She also smiled, evoking how her children used to make fun of her ability to save and cook for less:

I never threw anything away. I learned this when we were poor, and I kept it even when my husband worked for YPF [Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales, a big oil company that belonged to the state]. Raúl used to tell me: ‘I can eat whatever you prepare, but let me first do the autopsy’. If I served a pie, he would open it to see what was inside.³²

Maybe exorcising the dark insinuations of the ‘pie-autopsy’ in relation to her son’s never buried body, Bonafini laughed. Her moments of humour reminded me of H.I.J.O.S.’ spirit, a similar affirmation of life in the face of loss. A similar bittersweet style was in play when recalling Jorge, her other disappeared son:

Jorge was already married but he came home regularly. ‘Four days a week we eat chicken, but it is never real chicken’, he used to complain. He was right. I used to split the chicken in multiple parts to prepare schnitzels, giblets, stews. He had a little income, since he handed everything to his activism, and one day he told me: ‘Mum, would you *socialise* this chicken for me?’ Last year at ESMA I showed how to ‘socialise’ a chicken.³³

³¹ In the original: ‘Mi hijo menor Raúl era muy juguetón. Ponía un chamamé y me hacía bailar mientras yo fritaba papas fritas, o milanesa, hasta que se quemaba la comida. Yo nunca me enojaba. Tengo tan gratos recuerdos en la cocina. Siempre tiene que ver con cosas de amor (my translation).

³² In the original: ‘Yo toda la vida guardé todo, nunca tiré nada. Lo aprendí cuando éramos pobres aprendí eso y cuando estuvimos un poco mejor, cuando mi marido trabajaba en YPF y yo también trabajaba. Mi hijo menor, me decía yo como todo lo que vos hagás, pero dejame primero que le haga la autopsia. Si era una tarta la abría para ver qué tenía adentro’ (my translation).

³³ In the original: ‘Mi hijo mayor Jorge ya estaba casado pero venía siempre.. Mi hijo me decía comemos cuatro días pollo y nunca comemos pollo. Y claro yo hacía la milanesita, el menudito, los guisitos, las sopas. Y claro, mi hijo también empezó a tener poco sueldo porque todo lo entregaba a la militancia. Vino un día y me dijo: ‘mamá socializame este pollo’. El año pasado enseñé a socializar un pollo en la ESMA’ (my translation).

We laughed together with the episode. The ‘socialisation of the chicken’ was also prophetic. Years later, at the height of the military period, during the endless rounds at Plaza de Mayo Square, the *Madres* also ‘socialised’ motherhood: they acted for all the missing, not just for their children. This collective spirit was also present at ESMA. In fact, Bonafini re-emerged as a housekeeper dressed up with radical aprons. She mimicked a devoted cook only to jump into the contentious debates about memory and loss. In the sessions, an intricate combination of political and gender transgressions worked together. The patriarchal script that confines women to the kitchen was iterated, slightly subverted. Moreover, I suggest, the ‘bad script’ was re-inhabited as a key source of power. Armed with a big tablespoon, Bonafini re-appeared ready to convert her audience into supporters of an alternative form of mourning. Once again, she not only cooked for the victims but for all the guests that came to see what was going on at her socialised kitchen.

Performing the real

When considering Bonafini’s intervention as a performance, I am using the category not merely to highlight its spectacular component. Rather, I wish to address a political intervention that is strongly attached to the everyday expression of affects; mainly those related to food. But there is also an extra benefit of considering the cooking lessons as a performance. My argument is that these gatherings helped to make visible something that is still in the process of emergence in contemporary Argentina, a non-normative narrative of grief. I would like to locate this analysis in the context of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s exhaustive review of the artists who have used food as a medium of performance. She writes:

Food, and all that is associated with it, is already larger than life. It is already highly charged with meaning and affect. It is already performative and theatrical. An art of the concrete, food like performance, is alive, fugitive and sensory.³⁴

Drawing on this, Bonafini’s insistence on ‘bringing life into a place of death’ not only

³⁴ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, ‘Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium’, *Performance Research* 4.1 (1999), 1-30 (p.1).

reads as a personal manifesto that illustrates her ‘anti-museal’ ethos. It can also be thought of as an opportunity to convert a site of mourning by means of the sensory affects involved in the act of cooking. In fact, for Kirshenblatt-Gimblett there is an intimate bond between performance and food: ‘To perform in this sense is to make food, to serve food. It is about materials, tools, techniques, procedures, actions. It is about getting something done.’³⁵ This perspective sheds light on the ‘active’ components involved in Bonafini’s initiative. Still, the labour undertaken by the Mother at the ESMA kitchen was not mainly related to the production of goods, but also to another ‘performative’ way of dealing with trauma as a ritual intimately connected to the presence of an audience. ‘Food events move towards the theatrical and, more specifically, towards the spectacular’, argues Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.³⁶ Apart from the participatory spirit, there is indeed something ‘spectacular’ involved in the cooking sessions at ESMA. The Mother not only did the work for the audience in terms of producing food, but also in staging a theatrical scene for the collective digestion of mourning. In this sense, the Mother proposed a secular version of the Eucharist liturgy in which the possibility of sharing grief became attached to the ritual of eating together. At ESMA, the very act of sharing bread – or lentils or Mexican food- can be conceived as a practise of ‘trans-substantiation’. Within the Catholic tradition, bread and wine are the Eucharist species that change in substance to become the Body and Blood of Christ. In parallel, I suggest, during the food performances at ESMA the ingredients of a non-normative grief are created and even ‘transubstantiated’ in the bodies of the audience by the ingestion of ‘activist food’ – ultimately an alternative form of sacrament.

To expand further on this argument, I would like to read the cooking sessions in tune with some considerations raised by Ridout in relation to how contemporary artists manage to bring the ‘real’ on stage.³⁷ During a symposium at the Chelsea theatre, the scholar suggested that some forms of experimental theatre and live art shed light on a set of relations of production which are not necessarily or always visible or representable, including those in which the performance itself is produced. In so

³⁵ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, ‘Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium’, p. 1.

³⁶ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 2.

³⁷ I am considering here a paper that Nicholas Ridout presented at Chelsea Theatre on 3 November 2009 during the Sacred Festival. The paper is entitled ‘Performing the real: Economics and Aesthetics’ (unpublished). I am grateful to Ridout for giving me the permission to quote from his notes.

doing, these kind of experimental performances develop a form of immanent critique of the conditions that made them possible.³⁸ Ridout read this capacity of performance in tune with the theories of ‘immaterial labour’, developed by Italian scholars, such as Antonio Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato and Paolo Virno. He drew upon the work of Lazzarato to explore the connection between the service economy and the work that some performers deploy on stage. While suggesting a parallel between the aesthetics of post-Fordist capitalism and contemporary performance, Ridout argued that current forms of service economy are not mainly concerned with the production of goods but of emotions. Drawing upon this, he suggested that contemporary performers also manage to generate ‘affective labour’ on stage. Ridout’s reading fits well with the way in which Negri and Michel Hardt define the term. In fact, in *Empire*, they argue that ‘affective labour’ also produces social relations, communication and ‘forms of community’.³⁹ Still, not only did Ridout suggest that the kind of expertise and skills required by immaterial labour could be compared to the virtuosity of performing artists: he argued that ‘today’s experimental performance might have some structural relation to the practices of the service economy’.⁴⁰ While constantly looking for new ways of communication, in Ridout’s perspective, certain immersive theatrical experiences seek to reconfigure the relation between production and consumption through a practise of ‘activation’ of the audience.

Drawing from this insight, I would like to explore what is the ‘service’ produced in the ESMA kitchen. First, I contend that Bonafini’s cooking sessions can also be considered as a way of performing the real on stage. Like some contemporary performers, the Mother’s intervention at ESMA contributed to produce an alternative discourse of mourning in the aftermath of violence. In fact, her performance made ‘visible’ something that had not been articulated in the wider society. Her sessions solicited a new form of conviviality in the wake of loss, one which could be conceived as a secular communion. In fact, Bonafini’s way of engaging and rehearsing trauma through the experience of sharing food made grief available for expanded audiences. This could be read in tune with Andermann’s reassessment of Marianne Hirsch’s notion of ‘post-memory’ as an empathic form of transmission of

³⁸ Ridout, ‘Performing the Real: Economics and Aesthetics’, n.p.

³⁹ Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 293.

⁴⁰ Ridout, ‘Performing the Real: Economics and Aesthetics’, n.p

trauma.⁴¹ In so doing, these gatherings generated an alternative public in ways that exceed the ‘direct victims’ of violence, who have mostly endorsed the legitimacy of remembering in the post-dictatorial period. In this sense, Bonafini’s performance brought to light a new form of sacred community in a former space of death. This is the form of sociality that the Mother has produced at ESMA, one that in tune with contemporary performance and service economy can also be conceived as ‘affective labour’.

Moreover, in a period in which discourses of mourning tend to be officialised, Bonafini’s intervention reminded her audience that non-conventional forms of engaging with loss were still emerging and being intensively negotiated. In the small unit where the Mother operates, the ad hoc kitchen of a former detention camp, life became inseparable from work, mainly a non-normative *work of mourning*. In this sense, the emotions mobilized through the food performances facilitated a live digestion of the resonances of trauma among less implicated audiences. In so doing, Bonafini offered an antidote to official politics of remembering, still marked by the ‘biological’ normativity supported by the ‘wounded family’. I would like to suggest that this has been the ‘virtuosity’ and also the ‘immanent critique’ acknowledged by the Mother as a contemporary performer of the real.

While researching on food performances in Australia, Edward Sheer argues that ‘digestive theatre’ can be conceived of as a style of performance that is easily consumed by the audience, ‘who leaves the theatre edified and rewarded by the re-affirmation of middle-class values’.⁴² Drawing from this, I would contend that Bonafini provided a different ‘service’ for her audience. She staged a new narrative of mourning for those who might not feel ‘naturally’ enabled, non-kin fellows in grief. In so doing, the right to grieve became expanded to all those who came to ESMA to share a common meal. Food emerged an expanded way of partaking in mourning. In this sense, the food-performances also expanded the table of victims.

⁴¹ Anderman, ‘Returning to the Site of Horror: The Recovery of Clandestine Concentration Camps in Argentina’, n.p. (forthcoming). I will explore further on this during the analysis of Lola Arias’ *Mi vida después* (2009) in the next chapter.

⁴² Edward Scheer ‘Ritual of Incorporation: Food and Performance in Sydney, Australia’, *Performance Research* 4.1 (1999), 137-141 (p. 137).

Queering the table of victims

I would like to suggest that the cooking sessions at ESMA could be conceived as peculiar gatherings where the table of victims becomes queered. To frame this argument I would like to draw attention to Ahmed's reflections on tables. In 'Orientations. Towards a Queer Phenomenology', she describes the table as a kinship object that gives form to the family; it is the tangible thing over which the family gathers, and becomes normatively socialised.⁴³ Moreover, she suggests that a queer politics might offer a different angle on tables to include those 'whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place. The table becomes queer when it provides such support'.⁴⁴ This framework is fruitful to analyse Bonafini's performance. I argue that her intervention at ESMA queers traditional family tables, in particular that of the 'wounded family', those who have been directly affected by violence. In fact, for the relatives' associations, some 'external supporters', those who are not 'real victims', might also look 'strange' or 'oblique'. This form of exclusive and private grief is contested in the Mother's kitchen. Without doubt, the dictatorship did not affect all parts of Argentine society in the same way. Nevertheless, traces of this multi-layered trauma can be felt in the brand-new kitchen at ESMA. Beyond differential ways of being affected by violence, Bonafini proposes an extension of the family of victims. In so doing, she proposes alternative modes of partaking in grief.

In her work, Ahmed tends to describe queer gatherings as family encounters. While reflecting on this, she argues that this perspective enables her 'to have joy in the uncanny effect of a familiar form becoming strange'.⁴⁵ Ahmed's insight provides the grounds for me to analyse the cooking sessions as family gatherings in which the biological foundation of the 'wounded family' becomes queered. It also helps to stress the pleasure that emerges at the former camp, where family dinners are recreated in ways that, for some non-converted guests, may also taste uncanny. At ESMA kitchen, the privileges of blood are undermined. In fact, the experience of conversion not only involves a former site of death, but also the guests of a non-biological community; especially those who were not directly touched by violence. While sharing common

⁴³ Sara Ahmed, 'Orientations. Towards a Queer Phenomenology', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12.4 (2006), 543-574 (p. 559).

⁴⁴ Ahmed, 'Orientations. Towards a Queer Phenomenology', p. 570.

⁴⁵ Ahmed, 'Orientations. Towards a Queer Phenomenology', p. 569.

food, the guests are able to participate in an experience of mourning that might not feel entirely theirs. In this sense, the Mother emerges as a political leader who has the ability to create other families and tables, making space for audiences that may also feel ‘strangers’ within traditional narratives of grief.

Hebe de Bonafini and Bobby Baker: a virtual encounter

While researching Bonafini’s sessions at ESMA, many scholars indicated to me the strong resonance that these interventions had in relation to the work developed by Bobby Baker, one of the most popular artists in Britain working on live art and experimental theatre. Over the last 20 years, Baker has staged a series of solo performances where kitchen, food, and female roles have been in the foreground. The titles of her interventions, *Edible Family* (1976), *Mobile Home* (1976), *Kitchen Show* (1991) and *Table Occasion* (1997) invite a dialogue with Bonafini’s food experiments at ESMA. In this section, I will read both trajectories together in the hope that Baker’s work sheds light on how Bonafini’s experience of conversion does not imply a denial of the past.

Baker’s and Bonafini’s work seem to iterate the traditional association between emotions and the feminine. Their performances bear the traces of ‘excessive’ feelings that are usually relegated to the private sphere. They also highlight collective emotions that are part of the public sphere. From different perspectives, both activists have also explored the figure of the mother-artist and the artist-cook. On 10 March 2009, I interviewed Baker at her home in North London. I was curious about how she would respond to the ESMA experience. From the beginning, she was touched. She told me that the cooking lessons reminded her of Irish funerals in which food is left inside the coffin next to the body. ‘To bring death into conscience you have to eat it’, Baker said.⁴⁶ Her insight was revealing. It contributed to shed light on the strong ties between mourning and digestion that were also at the foreground of the gatherings at ESMA. It also helped me to articulate how audiences not directly affected by violence could also adopt the experience of mourning by sharing a meal.

⁴⁶ Unless indicated, Bobby Baker’s quotations belong to the interview I conducted on 10 March 2009 in London .

When I showed Baker the pictures that I took at the cooking sessions, she was particularly captivated by one that portrayed Bonafini wearing a Che Guevara apron and chopping ingredients in the ESMA kitchen (see figure 3, p. 212). She said:

It is impressive to see this woman standing with this apron and cooking. You don't need to be there to feel the power of this experience, the dignity of her work. She is steady.

'Steady': the word kept resonating. Later, I realised that Baker's description made reference to both a physical constitution and a psychic character involved in the Mother's presence. It reminded me of that childhood anecdote recalled by Bonafini in which she had commented on her vocation of 'eating everything', even 'what her brother left'. Somehow, I thought that the contingent maternal assertion, 'You need to eat to be big and have strength', was also present at ESMA. Here as well, Bonafini performed as the mother of all, not only of her disappeared children, nor even of the relatives, but also of all those who might come to join her brand new table at the former detention camp. Somehow, the discussion with Baker returned to the issue of gender roles, which also informs the British artist's performances. In this respect, Baker argued:

Cooking could be seen as the most essential aspect of family support, and also the most subordinated. However, in this context it becomes a political act. This woman transforms an everyday act into a big statement. Nothing could be more empowering than going to this place to have a meal. It is an act of resistance. Like Auschwitz, ESMA bears fragments of death and loss. The act of cooking is life-giving, is simple, is profound, and also a quite humble action.⁴⁷

Humility might not be one of Bonafini's main attributes. Even so, while listening to Baker, I thought that the connection between these two women became more significant, as if they were responding to each other without knowing of each other's existence. For instance, in *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988), Baker recites

⁴⁷ My interview with Bobby Baker was conducted on 10 March 2010 in London.

the story of her life while wrapping herself in a white sheet made from the contents of shopping bags. In a similar way, the testimonial and biographical content also informs Bonafini's cooking sessions. Whereas in Baker's performance the experience of the mother is framed by traditional housework, in Bonafini's case 'motherhood' is revealed through a scarf that becomes replaced by an apron. While Baker usually stages her body as the self-effacing, malleable and tortuous surface of female traumas, Bonafini has not stopped monumentalising herself. As much as Baker embraces the role of housekeeper as a way of contesting gender positioning, Bonafini attaches her gastronomic performance to celebrate her rising political trajectory as the cook of a converted grief.

While considering *Table Occasion*, Adrian Heathfield notices that what is most striking about Baker's work 'is not its humorous use of the social formality and restriction but the foundations of pain and fear upon which this playfulness is seen to rest.'⁴⁸ In an unexpected way, Heathfield's description also helped me to account for the atmosphere created at ESMA kitchen. Although these gatherings bear witness to the Mother's personal tragedy, her intervention does not stage her as a victim but rather as the playful cook of another future. Despite the affirmative mood of the venues, the 'foundation of pain and fear' is also their landscape. Moreover, loss is what makes the food sessions possible. In fact, this foundation of pain also shows how Bonafini's attempts at 'conversion' of ESMA do not rely on denying the past, but rather on showing how this past can bring new affective encounters in the present. To explore this point further, it is worth to consider the significant resonances that persist throughout Heathfield's reading of Baker's work. He writes:

Standing in the centre of the table, Baker serves her fare to a gathering of absent friends and family whose ghostly presence infiltrates her speech. As her serving progresses, the formal conventions which sustain the order of the meal are surpassed with increasing frequency by digressive anecdotes, intrusions of memory and returns of the repressed.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Adrian Heathfield, 'Risk in Intimacy: An interview with Bobby Baker', *Performance Research*, 4.1 (1999), 97-106 (p. 97).

⁴⁹ Heathfield, 'Risk in Intimacy', p. 97.

The echoes are engaging. In fact, the ghostly presence of ‘absent friends and family’ that Heathfield detects at Baker’s performance is also crucial at Bonafini’s table. If the Argentine Mother managed to transform the former navy school into a dining space, the lives that were made to vanish at the camp are not excluded from those gatherings; rather they became main guests at the ESMA table. Like Baker in *Table Occasion*, the cooking sessions propose a spectacle of conversion that propitiates the encounter with ‘infiltrated’ presences, ‘digressive anecdotes’ and ‘intrusions of memory’. In so doing, the ESMA kitchen also welcomes a collection of anachronistic guests. The ghost of a missing son can always return to make the Mother dance in the kitchen. The secrets of a ‘chicken socialisation’, once shared at her family dinner, can be transmitted to a larger audience of non-kin guests. Moreover, these ‘infiltrated presences’ show how the expanded table configured at the former camp also hosts the desire for creating affective communities across time. This sense of temporal multiplicity mobilised by the food can be framed as a form of ‘queer temporality’. The queer theorist Carolyn Dinshaw associates this temporality with ‘an expanded range of temporal experiences -experiences not regulated by “clock” time or by a conceptualization of the present as singular and fleeting; experiences not narrowed by the idea that time moves steadily forward’.⁵⁰ In this sense, I suggest, the ESMA kitchen not only invites contemporary guests but also those coming from the past and also from the future.

As if persistently engaging in a secret dialogue with Argentina’s traumatic past, in *Edible Family* Baker performs the scene of the family dissolution. This is how the artist refers to this experience in Heathfield’s article:

With this specific piece I was thrilled at the prospect of the family disappearing; that the work would be lost and that it would be absorbed into other people’s bodies.⁵¹

In conceiving eating as ‘absorbing’, Baker set a fundamental link between food and loss. In a similar way, I argue, the recreation of a collective meal is what makes grief

⁵⁰ Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman and Roderick Ferguson, ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion’, *GLQ*, 13. 2-3 (2007), 177-195 (p. 185).

⁵¹ Heathfield, ‘Risk in Intimacy’, p. 98.

edible at the former camp. If at her family kitchen Bonafini ‘socialised’ chicken, ESMA is the occasion for ‘socialising’ mourning, and ultimately making it ‘absorbable’; not only among traditional guests but also among expanded communities across time. While Baker’s food events engage with an audience that actually *eats* the artwork, Bonafini’s intervention stages the conditions through which trauma can be incorporated within a non-biological family. I do not want to mean that loss was not visible in post-dictatorship Argentina. Rather, that the food performances offered an expanded stage in which loss could circulate and become available for wider audiences.

Finally, Heathfield argues that Baker’s project explores the everyday rituals of women’s practice ‘not simply to assert it as an unacknowledged creativity, but to mine its hidden sensuality and joy.’⁵² In parallel, Bonafini’s intervention also introduces glimpses of joy within the experience of mourning. Twenty-five years after the end of the military regime, a temporal gap has been opened in relation to the traumatic event. Now, there are other audiences that bring new perspectives to engage with that past. There are second-hand witnesses who bring alternative stories to infuse with life the former site of fear and pain. Bonafini acknowledges this displacement through a change of outfit:

Scarves are for the political acts. If we [the *Madres*] are invited to stay for dinner, we take the scarves off. The cooking lessons may have a political touch, but the kitchen is not a demonstration. If I wore the scarf, people would feel a distance, they would not look at me as a peer. Scarves are to intimidate enemies, not those who are with us.⁵³

I suggest that the Mother’s change of outfits acknowledges another stage in the digestion of grief. Now it is not the time for threats, but for more expanded forms of community. It is time to build new ties and families in the face of loss. It is time to set up a new table and feed new guests.

⁵² Heathfield, ‘Risk in Intimacy’, p. 97.

⁵³ In the original: ‘El pañuelo se usa para actos políticos. Si nos invitan a una cena, nos los sacamos. La cocina aunque yo le doy un tono político, no es un acto político. Si tuviera pañuelo la gente me vería mucho más lejos. El pañuelo es para que nos tengan miedo los enemigos, no la gente que está con nosotros’ (my translation).

An alternative family in loss

In this section, I would like to argue that Bonafini's capacity to expand the family of victims at the ESMA kitchen could be read in tune with her own personal trajectory, which seems to be constitutively attached to loss. Indeed, the Mother built and lost many families in her life. Soon after her children were kidnapped, she broke relations with her biological family: 'From the side of my mother, they were all *fachos* [fascist] *milicos* [military] or they gathered with them; my father's side was more supportive'.⁵⁴ In fact, Bonafini's suspicion is that her relatives were involved in the kidnapping of her children:

A couple of days after my eldest son was taken, my aunt asked her son whether he might know something about my son's destiny. At this moment I realised that he was the one who kidnapped my son. Still, I asked them if there could be a way to see him. I wanted to protect Raúl [her youngest son]; I feared he could also be taken [as he finally was]. But they refused to help me. That day I told my mother 'Today, I buried my family. I don't have a family any longer'. Sometimes family is not the one you are left by inheritance but the one you choose. One builds families.⁵⁵

Consonant with other cases addressed in my research, Bonafini's experience of loss eventually forced her to conceive alternative forms of support beyond bloodline ties. I suggest that this process can help to explain the relationship that she eventually built with Sergio Schoklender, a man who was condemned for murdering their parents in complicity with his youngest brother in 1981, when they were both teenagers. By the time they met, he was still in prison. 'Sergio began to send us supportive letters each time the *Madres* organised a demonstration, even when he was punished and locked

⁵⁴ In the original: 'Mi familia de parte de mi madre son todos fachos, o eran milicos o se juntaron con los milicos, especialmente del lado de mi madre. La familia de mi padre fue mucho mas solidaria' (my translation).

⁵⁵ In the original: 'Días después de que se llevaran a mi hijo mayor, mi tía le preguntó a su hijo si sabía algo de mi hijo. Ahí me di cuenta de que él lo había secuestrado. Después les pregunté si no lo podía ver. Yo quería proteger a Raúl, se lo podían llevar a él. Y me dijo que no. Yo le dije a mi mama: 'Hoy enterré a toda la familia. Yo no tengo más familia'. A veces la familia no es la que uno le queda de herencia, es la que uno elige. Uno se arma familias' (my translation).

in the attic for months for that. I was curious and thought that I had to meet him. That is how I started visiting him in jail', Bonafini explained during our interview.⁵⁶ While in jail, Schoklender received a university degree in Law. After he was released in 1995, his role became progressively more central within the *Madres*. Eventually, he was Bonafini's right-hand, and also her 'stepson'. Horacio González, perhaps the wisest 'organic intellectual' of the Kirchnerist administrations, depicts well the Mother's stubborn mood for conversion. For him, Bonafini 'has taken as far as anyone the idea of a non-bloodline family [...] Yet, she searched at the stock of the wretched a new reason for affiliations'.⁵⁷ Even so, the relation between the mother of two missing activists and a 'parricide' was particularly difficult to digest within the orthodoxy of the relatives. Although the general public never ceased to be suspicious, for many years this non-normative and even queer bond became part of the landscape of the associations of the victims.

The Kirchner governments imposed a new test on this peculiar relationship. Less than six months after ex-President Kirchner's death and five months before the general elections that would re-elect his widow, the country witnessed another family tragedy. A corruption scandal emerged at the heart of the *Madres'* Foundation, which targeted Schoklender as the main responsible figure. In June 2011 the commissioner of the Foundation was accused of using public funding for personal enrichment. By that time, *Sueños compartidos* had become an enterprise, which received more than 756 million pesos from the national budget in social housing.⁵⁸ During the scandal, Schoklender resigned and the long-term relation with the Mother was suddenly and publicly broken.

At the time of my interview, the episode had not been revealed, and for Bonafini

⁵⁶ In the original: 'Sergio empezó a mandar adhesiones a las madres, cada vez que hacia una adhesión a una marcha de las madres, lo encerraban en un altillo. Yo pensaba cómo un tipo se va a ganar tantas palizas por mandar un papel escrito. Pensé que lo tenía que conocer y empecé a visitarlo en la cárcel' (my translation).

⁵⁷ In the original: '[...] llevó más lejos que nadie la idea de una familia no sanguínea (...). O bien, buscando en la estirpe de los desfallecidos, un motivo de nueva filialidad'. Horacio González, 'Filiaciones argentinas', *Página 12*, 29 June 2011 <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-171044-2011-06-29.html> [accessed 15 November 2011]

⁵⁸ From 2008, 4,788 flats and houses were to be built by the Foundation *Nuestros Sueños* in seven provinces of the country, and 1288 social homes were already delivered in Buenos Aires. See *La Nación*, 24 July 2011, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1391981-registran-junto-a-las-madres-a-un-jefe-de-inteligencia> [accessed 25 July 2011].

‘Sergio’ was still ‘like a son’.⁵⁹ Her office was covered with the drawings of Schoklender’s nine-year old adopted son, Alejandro, who called her ‘grandmother’. The Mother described these paintings with delight:

These are the *Madres* holding hands; and this is me, the one with the red lipstick. When he was five he asked me ‘why if you looked so long for your children couldn’t you find them?’ It is still so hard to reply to that, it shakes everything.⁶⁰

At the heart of the scandal concerning public funding, the reaction of the relatives’ associations was defensive. ‘We are very sad because we believe that this scandal affects the 30,000 disappeared and all the human rights associations’, said Marta Vásquez, president of *Madres Línea Fundadora*.⁶¹ ‘They are trying to get the scarves dirty’, read the collective statement signed by *Abuelas*, *Madres Línea Fundadora* and H.I.J.O.S., among other associations of the victims.⁶² ‘One has to know how to wear the scarves’, was the veiled critique addressed to Bonafini. More than in the tortuous nuances of the case, I am interested in considering how the reaction of the ‘wounded family’ was constructed around the privileges of blood. The relatives organically responded by evoking the ‘whiteness’ of the scarves. Certainly, the ‘contamination’ that they were addressing was not only related to the administration of funding. More extensively, it also acknowledged a potential ‘corruption’ within the lineage of loss. In this light, Schoklender was perceived as a threat, or even as ‘toxic’. After all, the queer bond between the *Madre* and her step-son had never met the standards of ‘purity’ required by the relatives.

By the end of 2011, Schoklender, accused of crimes of fraud against the government and money laundering, had to explain in court the destiny of 50 million pesos.⁶³ The

⁵⁹ In the original: ‘Sergio es como un hijo’ (my translation).

⁶⁰ In the original: ‘Me llama “abuela”. Estas somos las Madres de la mano, y ésta soy yo, con los labios rojos pintados. A los 5 años, me preguntó por qué si buscaste tanto a tus hijos no los encontraste? Es tan difícil contestar eso, te sacude todo’ (my translation).

⁶¹ In the original: ‘Nosotras estamos muy tristes porque creemos que este escándalo afecta a los 30 mil desaparecidos y a todos los organismos de Derechos Humanos’ (my translation) see Maia Jastreblansky, *La Nación* <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1380515-este-escandalo-afecta-a-los-30-mil-desaparecidos-dijo-la-presidenta-de-linea-fundadora> [accessed 3 August 2011]

⁶² In the original: ‘Intentan ensuciar los paneles’, see <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-169971-2011-06-12.html> [accessed 15 November 2011]

⁶³ ‘Schoklender, a indagatoria’, *Página 12*, 27 December 2011,

case is currently under investigation. In this context, the Kirchnerist administration put all its efforts into saving Bonafini from ruin. It has been suggested that the government provided her with ‘instructions’ about how to deal with the public resonances of the scandal.⁶⁴ These gestures should not only be read as a confirmation of fidelity to the most famous of the Mothers but also as political strategy to secure the government’s own legitimacy. I suggest that what is truly at stake within the contested case is who bears the legitimacy of memory in the post-dictatorial period. In this context, the price to bear the official support was high: Bonafini had to get rid of her deviant ‘son’. As far as I know, Bonafini has not seen her step-grandson again. The episode dismantled a non-biological family created from loss. Even so, I do not suggest that this break implies that all non-normative ties are condemned to failure. After all, they are the inevitable space of love, politics and dining tables.

A kitchen in a Human Rights City

Before returning to the UK, I attended a last cooking session. I invited Vivi Tellas to come with me. She is one of the most respected theatre directors in Argentina and her work inspired me to consider Bonafini’s cooking lessons as a performance.⁶⁵ That evening, sitting on school chairs, we shared a Mexican meal: chicken, peas and chocolate sauce. The huge saucepan was left empty. Standing at the back of the kitchen, Bonafini looked tired, perhaps older. ‘It is the final moment when the actor stops, the adrenaline is still circulating but the energy, the rhythm slows down. Then, the euphoric mood will come’, whispered Tellas. Before leaving, I approached Bonafini to say goodbye. She was euphoric. ‘Cooking at ESMA is like having dinner at home. It is like a party’, she said, and laughed.

I suggest that the uncertain projections of a tiny kitchen at the former camp also invite

<http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/ultimas/20-184261-2011-12-27.html>

⁶⁴ Guido Braslavsky, ‘La Rosada reuneva su táctica de apuntalamiento político de Hebe’, *Clarín*, 16 July 2011, http://www.clarin.com/politica/Rosada-tactica-apuntalamiento-politico-Hebe_0_518348427.html [accessed 19 July 2011]

⁶⁵ For her ‘Bio-drama’ series, she draws upon autobiographical experiences of regular people who develop special connections with their audiences. Tellas has developed four different pieces following these rules: *Mi mamá y mi tía*, *Filósofos con bigotes*, *Cozarinsky y su médico*, and *Escuela de conducción*. In each performance, she has worked with real people departing from their world and assuming that each person is a living archive that involves experiences, texts, knowledges, and images. See <http://www.archivotellas.com.ar/> [accessed 7 August 2011]

to consider an alternative form of ethics, one that is closer to fragility and contingency. In contrast to memorials, artworks or museums, Bonafini's cooking sessions seem to have no clear legacy. In the Mother's kitchen there is no enduring inheritance, other than the traces of chat and food shared in each session. I contend that it is precisely this fugitive character of the gatherings that may help the audience to glimpse a non-normative act of grief and another relation to loss. Different from more stable sites of remembrance, the theatricality of a kitchen sited at ESMA points towards a collective digestion of grief during an ephemeral supper that can always be the last one. Instead of compulsory acknowledgment of trauma, the live, embodied and precarious character of these venues seem to be deeply connected with the feelings of exposure and vulnerability that emerges from loss. In this sense, I suggest, the cooking sessions also enhance their fugitive condition within traditional repertoires of memory.

In fact, one of the main differences that distinguish the food sessions from other experiences currently in place at ESMA is that audiences do not come 'already-made' to Bonafini's kitchen. As the Mother told me, many of those who regularly come to the meetings are not familiar with the group's long-term activism. By contrast, audiences are forged in the space of performance. The experience of food-communion turns a new public into being. In this respect, the cooking gatherings reconfigure the relation between stage and auditorium. From the ashes of the dictatorship, a displaced ceremony of the Eucharist is evoked. This process of conversion bears the traces of a ritual of metamorphosis that takes places through food. Passion, death and resurrection, the core elements of the Catholic tradition, are also iterated and displaced at ESMA gatherings. Yet, attires are not necessarily pious. A Mother dressed in an apron with Che Guevara's face leads them. Her kitchen provides an experimental stage in which trauma can be ingested. It offers refuge to non-conventional mourners, those who have been persistently excluded from the rights of remembering.

Rather than reconciliation, the cooking sessions speak about a way of conjuring the past without forgetting it. They stage a peculiar intersection of corporeality, space and time in relation to loss. Stories of trauma are not left behind. Rather, they work as a reminder that 'the social, political, and aesthetic relations of the present are always

already composed of, and haunted by loss', as Gust A. Yelp writes in a different context.⁶⁶ The bodies that have been made to disappear at ESMA still haunt its premises. As much as non-kin guests bring fresh airs to all family meetings, the cooking sessions also show how loss can also bring spaces of joy and dialogue. In this respect, the prospect of the conversion of the former military school acquires new meaning. As Butler writes 'places are lost – destroyed, vacated, barred – but then there is some new place, and it is not the first, never can be the first [...] 'newness' itself, is founded upon the loss of original place.'⁶⁷ ESMA might eventually become a 'Human Rights City'. Nonetheless, it will be always inhabited by its past. The 'newness' of the former detention camp is still to be discovered. At least, the 'coming after' can be negotiated at the table.

Food combines biology and social life. It bridges the private and the public through rituals of everyday life. The secrets and taboos that circulate during family dinners are also a part of ESMA's expanded table. If the family meal is always a source of drama, Bonafini's performance ultimately manages to make this drama public. The food gatherings invite an exploration of trauma away from individual symptoms and closer to a communal experience. They also suggest a different temporality of political life. Food touches across times. The flavours of the past can always re-inhabit the present. In this sense, the kitchen at ESMA shows how inhabiting a place can be a way of transforming it, and also a way of awakening it to new scenes, flavours and smells. In this re-occupation, also new lineages are formed, maybe from something as basic as 'cooking and chatting'. The kitchen at ESMA shows how mourning not only destroys but also creates spaces, bodies and subjectivities. The cooking gatherings invite new guests to join the table. They explore alternative ways in which loss can be digested in a common environment. In so doing, they also make loss *palatable*.

⁶⁶ Gust A. Yelp, 'The Politics of Loss and its Remains in Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt', *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10.4 (2007), 681-70 (p. 682).

⁶⁷ Judith Butler, 'Afterword: After loss, what then' in *Loss*, ed. by David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 468.

Lola Arias' *Mi vida después* (2009): Performance of Blood and the Attire of Memory

Introduction

A cascade of clothes falls onto an empty stage. A woman in her early-twenties emerges from the mountain of fabric and picks out a pair of jeans. She tries them on and walks forwards to the front of the stage approaching the audience with her hands in her pockets:

When I was seven, I used to get dressed up in my mum's clothes and parade around the house like a tiny queen [...]. Twenty years later I find a pair of my mum's Lee jeans from the seventies, and they fit me just right. I put on the jeans and start to walk towards the past.¹

Facing the audience, the woman plays a frantic guitar solo. Meanwhile, five other youngsters cross the stage and start rummaging through the pile of clothes (see figure 4, p. 212). They throw the pieces of fabric into the air in an uneasy fight with the costumes of the past. This is *Mi vida después*' opening scene. Lola Arias' production was premiered in Buenos Aires in March 2009 at the *Teatro Nacional Sarmiento*.² The first time I attended this performance was on a warm Thursday in April 2009. The public that gathered at the front of the venue looked diverse. Apart from youngsters slightly over-conscious of their intellectual looks –classical habitués at Arias' productions – there were also middle-aged couples dressed up for a special night out, former activists, elders, and groups of students sporting alternative neo-hippie outfits. A promotional offer, which included a 30 per cent discount on the standard tickets, contributed to the mixed audience. The contrast was provocative: at

¹ All the quotations of the play included in this chapter have been taken from *My Life After* (2009), by Lola Arias, translated by Daniel Tunnard (unpublished). Thanks to the director for permission to quote from the text. I am not providing quotes in Spanish since this is the 'official' translation of the play and recognised as such by the author.

² The venue bears the name of one of the Argentine national heroes: Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888), the seventh president of the country and member of the so-called 'Generation of 1837', a group of intellectuals deeply concerned with educational issues.

an official venue belonging to the national network of theatres, we were about to witness a provocative hour-long show that proposed a deviant deconstruction of official narratives of grief.

Mi vida después was supposed to be released as part of Vivi Tellas' series of 'bio-drama'. The well-know director, who accompanied me to the cooking sessions at ESMA, invited Arias to participate in her series of documentary theatre that she launched at the Sarmiento theatre.³ As Tellas eventually resigned as artistic director of this venue, Arias' production was finally released as an autonomous piece. Faithful to the 'bio-drama' principle of enacting real lives on stage, *Mi vida después* presents the stories of six professional actors who were born during the dictatorship. Their backgrounds are very different. Alongside descendants of guerilla activists, exiled intellectuals, and a police officer working for the military, the production also includes testimonies of those who are not usually considered as victims, such as the son of a bank employee or the offspring of a converted priest. The play is based on the personal experiences of these actors, their real stories. The actors show the pictures of their parents, they read their letters and in some cases they enact their deaths. Childhood memories, nightmares, and family gossip send the audience back and forth, from the past to the present, and also to the future. As the first scene shows, the premise is so simple it is childish: to put on the parents' clothes so as to enact their youth. The pile of clothes works as the perfect medium to step into a time machine. As if it were a science-fiction film, the actors alternate between motor racers, priests, guerrillas, and bank employees in performing the most spectacular stunts of their parents' lives.

Looking at the young cast wearing those old clothes on stage, I got the feeling that a strange dislocation of time was taking place on stage. The actors did not embody their parents' lives – how could they? – but their own ambivalent versions of them. Still, something profoundly uncanny emerged from this particular combination of costumes and flesh. To some extent, it reminded me of Aoife Monks' argument that costumes and actors become indistinguishable in the experience of performance.³ 'Costumes

³ Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 7.

have a peculiar half-life: they are not quite objects and not quite actors.’⁴ More than ever, within Arias’ production the ghostly character of those clothes is material of contestation. In fact, through their ‘half-life’ quality, the descendants revisit and re-inhabit the lives of their parents to revise their own heritage. Indeed, those costumes also speak about new desires infused by the performers onstage. In this sense, it is not that the past is represented but rather it becomes enacted and twisted right in front of the audience. Strangely enough, those deferred, impossible scenes flash back, ‘to interrogate the present in a moment of danger’, as Walter Benjamin once addressed.⁵

In this chapter I would like to consider the impact of Marianne Hirsch’s idea of ‘post-memory’ in the context of Argentina’s post-dictatorship. I will examine whether this structure of transmission, specially crafted to address the experiences of those who were not direct witnesses of traumatic events, could contribute to shed light on the debates that are currently taking place in the country.⁶ Drawing on Arias’ production and a series of interviews conducted with the director and the actors in Buenos Aires during April 2009 and January 2010, I will explore the extent to which personal testimonies can travel off the stage to build new affiliations in the present. In this sense, I will show how *Mi vida después* displays an uneasy machine of affects that helps to explore the resonances of grief beyond those usually considered as victims. Ultimately, I would like to explore the possibilities of adopting trauma in the context of spectatorship.

A time machine

For the last 10 years, Arias has pursued a programme that includes theatrical plays, songs, poems, installations, live concerts, and urban performances. This repertoire acquired cult status among students, artists and filmmakers of her generation, those who are now in their thirties.⁷ Since her debut *Escuálida familia* (translated for foreign audiences as *A Kingdom, A Country or a Wasteland in the Snow*, 2001), Arias contributed to the emergence of a circuit of ‘post-memory’ directors, mostly born

⁴ Monks, *The Actor in Costume*, p. 121.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1968), pp. 245-255 (p. 247).

⁶ Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Post-memory’, *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008), 103-128 (p.103).

⁷ For an expanded analysis of Lola Arias’ work, see Cecilia Sosa, ‘Lola Arias: Expanding the Real’ in *No More Drama*, ed. Peter Crowley, (Dublin: Project Press, 2011), pp. 46-66.

during or after the dictatorship and largely based in Buenos Aires. Contrasting with the ostensible wave of dry humour and neo-realist stories introduced by the ‘New Argentine Cinema’ discussed in Chapter 2 (pp. 71-73), this lineage of theatre-makers has offered slightly more stylish and playful experimental proposals, which have been keen to include live music, screens, surreal poetry and dance tandems on stage. Overall, these productions have been mostly reluctant to deal with controversial issues of the past, as if they were separating a playful tone from contamination by over-exposed questions with respect to the politics of memory. The autonomy of subjects and styles among this wave of directors became a sort of aesthetic platform that furtively denied the demands for a revision of the past guided by the Kirchnerist period. Arias was no exception to this tradition, until *Mi vida después*.

To ground the kind of problems that I am interested in exploring here, I need to rewind to the first scene of the show. Once again, we see the actor dressed in her mother’s jeans travelling to the past. On a bus route, she runs into her still young parents. They all take a motorbike ride around Buenos Aires. This is how the actor pictures that fantastic trip:

My dad’s at the front, then my mum, then me at the back, with the wind
hitting me so hard it’s as if it’s trying to erase my face.⁸

I would like to suggest that the wind that attempts to deface the actor embodies the force that first generations have on the experiences of the descendants. In fact, this problem has been of central interest in Hirsch’s work. As the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, she argues that second generation witnesses connect so deeply with the previous generation’s remembrances that these experiences seem to constitute memories in their own right.⁹ Different from contemporary witnesses, Hirsch contends that for descendants of traumatic events the past is ‘not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation.’¹⁰ In fact, the scholar warns that the main risk involved in this affective structure of transmission is that descendants may have ‘their own stories and experiences displaced and even

⁸ *My Life After* (2008), by Lola Arias, transl. Daniel Tunnard (unpublished), n.p.

⁹ Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Post-memory’, p. 106.

¹⁰ Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Post-memory’, p. 107.

evacuated by those of a previous generation.’¹¹ Indeed, this sort of displacement foregrounds Arias’ production. Nonetheless, I wish to make the case that, from the first scene onwards, *Mi vida después* will develop a critical machine to fight against this occupation. In doing so, it also provides me with an exemplary case to critically engage with Hirsch’s model of post-memorial transmission. In fact, the very idea of time machine speaks about a new technology of memory taking place on stage, one that gives a sense of a tense negotiation between descendants and parental figures. Two generations are back together; they face each other, they are both young. In that fantastic encounter of costumes and time, *Mi vida después* confronts the audience with two undercover assumptions. Not only can past stories be revised, recreated and even transmitted from one generation to another, but also the re-examination of the past can be a means of discovering something new about the future. Far from being just mannequins of their parents, the new generations literally *act* their own futures. In this sense, Arias’ production can be read as a provocative attempt at cross-dressing the parental figures that defies time. In fact, as Monks suggests, ‘theatre invokes and invents bodies through the act of crossing, and changing clothes can mean changing bodies on the stage and in the audience.’¹² While proposing a creative entanglement between actors and performers, costumes and characters, documentary and life, *Mi vida después* creates an empowered fiction for the present, one in which the new generations have power on their side.

What we have left

Arias’ production operates through the objects that the actors inherited from their parents: family pictures, home-made videos, old tapes, letters, toys, books, pictures, even a turtle. On the verge of being forgotten, these minor objects become souvenirs. They are not only individual spoils, but also cultural treasures. These objects were brought back on stage to test their resonances in the present.

At an early moment, Mariano Speratti shows a toy car to the audience: ‘This is the Bugatti Type 35C that my dad gave me when I was three’.¹³ The toy is projected onto

¹¹ Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Post-memory’, p. 107.

¹² Monks, *The Actor in Costume*, p. 97.

¹³ Arias, *My Life After*, n.p.

a massive screen as if it were being dissected. The actor explains that his father was a Peronist activist who repaired old cars at a workshop, which during the 1970s was used to hide weapons. In 1976 his father was kidnapped during a military raid. One of the few things that Mariano was left was a reel-to-reel recorder: 'The tape I like the most is the one where he calls my name'.¹⁴ Mariano's son, Moreno, is also on stage. He is four years old, just a little older than Mariano when his father was taken. They both operate the old recorder and the cheerful voice of a missing father floods the hall: 'Mariano, Marianoooooooooooo'. The voice resonates as clear and lively as in the 1970s. It is a voice that sounds beyond artifice, almost naked. On stage, three generations are bonded together. An old tape allows the past to touch the present. It works as the material reminder of what Benjamin describes as a 'secret agreement between past generations and the present one'.¹⁵ Moreno plays around.

In her turn, Vanina Falco brings a picture on stage. It portrays two kids embracing each other. She explains:

My brother is the one I love the most in my family. We have always been inseparable even though five years ago we found out we are not related by blood. My brother is the son of murdered militants, and my father abducted him because my mother couldn't have children any more.¹⁶

On stage, Vanina wears a blue suit like her father used to wear when he said he was out 'to sell medicines'. When Vanina was 21 she left home with a black eye: her father had discovered that she was in love with another girl. Seven years later she found out that her alleged brother was the son of an activist couple. Her father, who was in fact an intelligence officer working for the military, had abducted him from ESMA. 'My whole life became fiction. My mother isn't my brother's mother, my brother isn't my brother, and my dad has many faces', says Vanina on stage.¹⁷ I will return to her case later in this chapter.

Still, not all the stories presented on stage are so dramatic. Pablo Lugones is the twin

¹⁴ Arias, *My Life After*, n.p.

¹⁵ Benjamin, 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History', p. 246.

¹⁶ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

¹⁷ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

son of a couple who had no political involvement. His name carries the traces of a tragic family saga, which includes Leopoldo Lugones, a brilliant poet and controversial essayist who committed suicide in 1938; his son Polo, a police commissioner and torturer; and Pirie, the grand-daughter, a Montonera activist who ‘disappeared’ in 1978.¹⁸ Pablo’s branch, however, did not seem to retain any sign of that uncertain glory. During the dictatorship, his father was an employee at a bank that was occupied by the military. The most harmful episode he recalls is that his father was obliged to shave his long hippie beard. Pablo shows a pair of boots he inherited from his grandfather. When he puts them on, he performs a striking ‘gaucho’ dance, as if those boots could recover the majestic power hidden in his tragic lineage. In his turn, Blas Arrese Igor brings a turtle on stage. He inherited it from his father who used to be a priest and left the Church when he met her mother ‘to populate the world’.¹⁹ At each performance, the turtle is required to run a ‘YES/NO’ contest to determine whether or not there will be a revolution in the country. In this way, the prophetic turtle recreates the links among heritage, superstition and theatre. The turtle-game also suggests that the series of repetitions performed on stage are ultimately unpredictable, maybe as much as what new generations will do with the inherited legacies.

Although these personal testimonies are first presented separately, eventually the show will bond them together. In the new assemblage, the stories of those who were not directly touched by violence have a crucial role to play: they help to grasp how the resonances of trauma can be processed collectively, beyond those usually considered as the ‘real victims’.

Without pedigree

Lola Arias was born in 1976, the year of the military coup in Argentina. She has no relatives who ‘disappeared’. To some extent, her work has run outside the narratives of blood. This ‘illegitimate’ background attracted global media attention as soon as the show began touring major festivals in Europe and Latin America. During an

¹⁸ Socorro Estrada has reviewed the many publications that explore the Lugones’ tragic lineage. See S. Estrada, ‘La maldición de los Lugones’, *Revista N, Clarín*, 30 October 2004, <http://edant.clarin.com/suplementos/cultura/2004/10/30/u-859136.htm> [accessed 23 December 2011]

¹⁹ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

interview conducted in Buenos Aires in 2010, Arias told me:

Most journalists kept on asking ‘why you?’, as if one must have a sort of inherited right to talk about this issue, as if only the children of the victims were the ones allowed to talk. I may not have had any tragic story in my family, but I am also touched because was born in 1976, and all my childhood was marked by the dictatorship.²⁰

I could recognise myself in the director’s words. Indeed, that international reaction did nothing but repeat the long-term local tradition, which largely stipulated that only those related by blood to the missing have the right to engage with the dictatorship’s legacies. Still, I was surprised to hear that Arias’ production also raised suspicions among her colleagues:

When I started working on this show, the artists of my generation looked down on me. They said that I was going to do something shit and that I was going to repeat the same old discourse. But I wanted to tell different stories. That is why there are not only children of the disappeared in the play.²¹

Against predictions, Arias’ piece removed all conventional markers. Her show does not speak from the side of the victims, but from those who apparently have not been affected by violence. Pervasive screens, live alteration of images, and vibrant solos corrupt previous forms of documentary theatre. For the first time an ‘outsider’, a young woman with no *pedigree* – as H.I.J.O.S.’ activists would say – comes forward to intervene in the battle of memory.²² From this non-normative perspective, *Mi vida después* stands for a politics of mourning where the experience of being affected is

²⁰ In the original: ‘Los periodistas me preguntaban ¿por qué vos?, como si uno tuviera que tener un derecho heredado para hablar de esto, como si los únicos que tuvieran derecho a decir y a opinar fueran los hijos de las víctimas. Me toca porque nací en 1976; toda mi infancia está marcada por eso’ (my translation). My interview with Lola Arias took place on 10 January 2010 in Buenos Aires. Unless indicated, the quotes included in this chapter belong to this talk.

²¹ In the original: ‘De entrada, cuando dije que quería trabajar sobre este tema, todos los artistas de mi generación me dijeron que no iba a poder, que iba a hacer una mierda, que iba a repetir el mismo viejo discurso de siempre. Pero yo quería contar otras historias, por eso no hay solo hijos de desaparecidos en la obra’ (my translation).

²² For a further discussion of the idea of pedigree, see Chapter 1, pp. 50-53, and pp. 67-68.

not limited to familial borders but open to more expanded affiliations. In order to do so, it displays a fantastic performance of costumes and blood; a generational machine which solicits a differential engagement with technology and humour.

The death of the father

To see this generational machine in action, I would like to focus on a specific scene. Carla Crespo, one of the actors, recalls the death of her father, a guerrilla activist who reached a high position within the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP). Dressed as a female guerrilla, she says to the audience:

I've heard so many versions of how my dad died that it's as if he died several times, or as if he never died. If my dad's life were a film, I'd like to play his stunt double.²³

Empowered by these customs, Carla becomes the leader of a guerrilla group. She uses a loudspeaker to instruct the rest of the actors who run, jump and crawl around the stage, re-enacting the atmosphere of a clandestine training during the 1970s. 'Death number one', yells the actor: 'When I'm six, my mum told me my dad died in a car accident'.²⁴ Straightaway, the team of actors breaks file to make a structure from chairs; they turn on a radio and sit inside chatting loudly, as if they were travelling in a fictional car. Seconds later, the music stops and all heads drop down. 'Death number two', shouts Carla:

When I'm 14, during a family gathering my grandma says right in front of me that my dad died in 1975, at the Battle of Monte Chingolo, in a clash between the ERP and the military.²⁵

As if it were a fantastic sequence from an action movie, the actors perform that clash using their fingers like guns and falling down in the ground. Despite the ostensibly childish proceeding, the remake depicts the spirit of sacrifice usually attributed to

²³ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

²⁴ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

²⁵ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

those armed groups, subtly exaggerated as if coming from a bitter cloud of irony. The exchange of roles among the actors proposes mischievous touches across time. The son of the priest kills the leftist activist whereas the daughter of the policeman plays the part of the traitor. The pace of the sequence leaves little time for breath. ‘Death number three’, continues Carla:

When I am 20, I read a letter that the party sent to my mum, saying that all those wounded at Chingolo had been taken prisoner and shot three days later.²⁶

The militant-performers walk together to the back of the stage and, as if suddenly hit by invisible bullets, they all fall down over the pile of clothes. Carla looks to the audience and says that those who were killed during that episode had their hands cut off so they could be identified. However, the high temperatures of this summer of 1975 made the hands decompose and the bodies could not finally be recognised. ‘That is why my mother and I are still alive’, says the actor.²⁷ The scene finishes with the crew sketching a chalk mass grave on the floor, compressing the cemetery where Carla’s father may have been buried alongside 50 other bodies with no hands. ‘Two years ago I did a DNA test to find out whether my dad is buried there. I am still waiting for the results’, she says.²⁸ In fact, when the piece was re-staged at a little venue in Buenos Aires in 2011, these lines had to be amended. By that time, Carla had received the DNA results that confirmed that her father was in that common grave. On discovering the variance in the script, I was shocked. It seemed to me that the piece had acquired a new life: it gained the capacity to change alongside the stories performed on stage. Also in those terms, *Mi vida después* subverted the boundaries between documentary and fiction, the private and the collective. I would like to suggest that this collective dissection of the past proposes an experience of transmission that contests familial narratives.

Not only the family

²⁶ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

²⁷ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

²⁸ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

The previous scene offers a fruitful case to explore further the mechanisms at stake in 'post-memorial' structure of transmission. In fact, Hirsch argues that within descendants' recollections the frontiers between truth and fiction tend to blur away. In this respect, it is clear that the way in which Arias' production engages with the parental past is not related to a regime of 'truth' but rather to an affective and even fantastic ethics and aesthetics of remembrance, which seems to confirm and even enhance the show's post-memorial inscription. Moreover, within the piece the fragmentary stories transmitted by the family acquire the form of enigmatic fairy tales. Nonetheless, Hirsch also argues that this mode of transmission can also endorse a strategy through which the post-generation asserts 'its own victimization alongside that of the parents'.²⁹ By contrast, I argue that Arias' production challenges this assumption. It ultimately shows how a generation manages to deal with overwhelming memories moving on from family narratives. Performance appears here as the potential engagement for producing an alternative future.

Although Carla's testimony initially draws upon the stories inherited from her family, this bloodline framework is also undermined on stage. At some point, the actor playing her ghost-father on stage appears to be enacting a fantasy emerged from the performance itself. Moreover, this is not simply an actor giving an account of a painful episode but a whole team collaborating to build her story, and being affected by its vibrations and resonances. In this sense, the group is not simply representing the actress's ambivalence but exposing it in all its contradiction and difference. Thus, I suggest, the final performance does not assert 'victimization' but rather it shows how the idea of being affected can be staged beyond bloodline ties. Nonetheless, if Arias' production manages to do so, it is not through the single force of the individual stories. Rather, it is because of the collective framework on which the performance relies and in which the performance takes place.

While subverting the boundaries between documentary and fiction, the individual and the collective, Carla's sequence also contests the idea of testimony as the expression of an inner and private self. If the association of the relatives in Argentina have tended to conceive the idea of testimony as excruciating facts that inform legal trials, *Mi vida*

²⁹ Hirsch, 'The Generation of Post-memory', p. 108.

después proposes new dialogues among testimony and performance. Arias' production illuminates how first person accounts of traumatic events can differ from the mere exposure of sorrow or private accounts of suffering. Rather, the possibility of 'giving an account of one self', to use Butler's expression, emerges as a ritualistic performance that can be rehearsed, iterated and finally cross-dressed beyond bloodline inscriptions.³⁰ On stage, personal testimonies emerge as a chorus of voices, costumes and flesh that evoke an experience of communality. In this way, *Mi vida después* offers an alternative response to the duty of memory, one that erupts and multiplies the possibilities of the bodies on and off the stage.

A kiss from the past

To explore this argument further, I would like to focus on a scene that proposes the remaking of a kiss. The sequence focuses on Liza Casullo. She was almost born in a lift in Mexico City in 1981. Her father, Nicolás Casullo, a recognised left wing intellectual, unexpectedly died during the play's rehearsals in October 2008. On stage, Liza confesses that she thought of leaving the show, although she finally stayed. She explains that her parents were forced into exile before the military took power: the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (AAA) was pursuing them. While Liza speaks, two of the actors, Blas and Carla, play the role of her parents. The rest of the cast operates a camera and the audience can follow the remade scene projected on a big screen at the back of the stage. Liza gives the instructions: 'Close-up of my mum's profile. In the background, my dad, out of focus with a book in his hand'. Blas says: 'We have to leave the country'. Carla: 'why?' Blas: 'Someone sent me a death threat'. Liza instructs: 'My mum blinks'. On the big screen, Carla blinks. Blas says: 'Will you marry me?' After an edgy silence, Liza gives the final instruction: 'My parents kiss for seven and a half minutes.'³¹ The actors meet in a slow motion kiss, which is extended, enlarged, and subtly faked, as if it were part of a cheesy television soap.

While interviewing the actors in Buenos Aires they all agreed they had fun performing this scene, especially those in charge of the kiss. More than a 'joke', I suggest that the sequence can help me to address further how the transmission of

³⁰ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

³¹ All the previous lines correspond to Arias's play, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

trauma can go beyond bloodline narratives. Moreover, it shows how the experience of being undone by loss can help to build alternative affiliations for the future. In fact, one of the most striking proceedings featured by Arias' show is the collective way in which each story is performed on stage. During each section, the actors not only enact their own lives and those of their parents, but also the ones of the rest of the team. This operation becomes stressed when the actors exchange roles to recreate a marriage proposal that took place in the 1970s. That seemingly blissful moment is brought back through a pantomimic choreography, which seems to defy any romantic atmosphere. History is written backwards. The actor who commands the scene is the daughter of that bride and groom, not even born at the moment of the event. If emotions belong to an irretrievable instant always located in the past, this twisted variant of affection comes to be satirically performed three decades later. Arguably, the remade kiss stands as a bad copy. Nonetheless, the transition that goes from one kiss to another reveals the playful and critical space that the younger generation found to deal with its overwhelming stories.

Furthermore, these bodies touching each other, operating through each other, eventually settle on a 'politics of touch' where the body on stage, as Erin Manning would say, 'is always more than one'.³² This collective assemblage that underpins the scene finally exceeds familial lines of transmission bringing at the foreground new generational desires. Furthermore, that mischievous kiss can also be conceived of as a response to the sense of bereavement evoked by Liza's father's death. It introduces a joyful moment that undermines the feeling of loss that remains at the background. Also in this sense, it is a kiss that touches across times. In so doing, the remade kiss laughs in the face of death and mocks the on-going familialism, staging the uncanny pleasures of being plural in grief.

Importantly, this structure of transmission not only involves the bodies of the actors, but also and fundamentally the bodies of the audience. While laughing in the darkness in front of the overacted kiss, the public acknowledges the circulation of affects that emerges from the exchange of costumes and roles on stage. This radiation circulates on and off while assessing the tricks of time and space enhanced by the estrangement

³² Manning, Erin 'The Collectivity of a Life', *Body & Society*, 16.1 (2010), 117-127 (p. 123).

of theatre. As Nicholas Ridout suggests, theatre can be conceived as a ‘vibratorium’, a threshold space where the affects experienced on stage can also resonate outside it, in a kind of radiation that circulates back and forth from the audience.³³ Drawing upon Ridout’s insight, I suggest that the vibrations emanated from a kiss draw a form of intimacy that quivers in the bodily encounter with the audience. In so doing, Arias’ production brings into being a form of ‘fleeting community’.³⁴ In this sense, the performance of a kiss allows both actors and public to share a non-normative experience of grief, one that contests victimizing narratives by presenting a new idea of being together after loss. In this process, both loss and joy become available to the audience.

Don’t cry for me, Argentina

When *Mi vida después* was re-staged in Buenos Aires in 2011, Susana Villalba, a respected poet and theatre critic, wrote a harsh review of the show. She accused the piece of bearing a tone of ‘light comedy’ that lessened and ultimately trivialised the reception of the traumatic past.³⁵ She also queried the prevailing familial inscription of the stories, suggesting a lack of criticism of the parental figures. The accusation incited a quarrel inside the group in which two main positions were finally delineated. While one of the actors whose father was assassinated by the military published an angry response to the journalist, Arias argued that there was no need to respond since the piece ‘spoke for itself’.³⁶ To my eyes, the internal discussion was convoluted and even disheartening: the hierarchies of blood that I was trying to contest through my project seemed to be confirmed. Once again, the ones who felt the ‘right’ to respond were those usually considered as the ‘true’ victims of violence. Although the tensions remained, the episode was fortunately sorted inside the group.

Nonetheless, drawing upon this episode, I would like to illustrate in which expanded

³³ Ridout, ‘Welcome to the Vibratorium’, *Senses & Society*, 3.2 (2008), 221–231 (p. 222).

³⁴ Ridout, ‘Welcome to the Vibratorium’ p. 231.

³⁵ Susana Villalba, ‘El discurso del vencedor’, *Revista N, Clarín*, 12 February 2011.

³⁶ I had access to this internal discussion since my review of the show was published alongside Villalba’s article. For this reason, I was included in the email exchange among casting and friends commented on both. See C. Sosa, ‘En el nombre del padre’, *Revista N, Clarín*, 12 February 2011, http://www.revistaenle.clarin.com/escenarios/teatro/nombre-padre-hijo_0_428357361.html [accessed 23 December 2011]

terms Arias' performance 'spoke for itself', to use the director's expression. In so doing, I also attempt to offer a delayed response to Villalba's review of the piece. My argument here is not related to the script or the kind of testimonies delivered by the actors in relation to their parents. Rather, I would like to draw attention to a certain constitution of the bodies on stage that remains in excess of the practices of the speaking subject. In order to do so, it is productive to consider the 'non-verbal, non-conscious dimensions of experience' that Arias' performance brings into play. These dimensions have been at the centre of attention of scholars working on the expanding field of affect, since they help them to reengage with questions of memory, attention and perception, as Lisa Blackman and Couze Venn address in a recent discussion on the future of affect studies published in *Body & Society*.³⁷ Drawing on this, I suggest that more than a universe of uniform stories what Arias's show brings to the forefront is an 'experiential choreography', a form of co-enactment and co-evolution of the bodies on stage, to use Blackman and Venn's expressions.³⁸ Moreover, I argue that this collective assemblage is mostly attached to a particular use of technology and certain appeal to humour that Arias' show foregrounds. Both elements play a distinctive role in this production, reinforcing each other and crafting a generational platform to recall the traumatic past. In fact, despite the harsh and even dramatic content of most of the testimonies, Arias' show never loses a singular playful mood. This affective tone clearly differs from the solemn productions dealing with similar issues, mainly those staged by *Teatro por la Identidad*.³⁹ As the director acknowledges, this was in fact her aim from start:

I didn't want to make a play of people crying. It would have been demagogic and I didn't want a melancholic play at all. I didn't want to repeat what was already there within the human rights associations. For me, it was important that the play could have irony and the humour of our generation.⁴⁰

³⁷ Lisa Blackman and Couze Venn, 'Affect', *Body & Society*, 16.1 (2010), 7-28 (p. 8).

³⁸ Blackman and Venn, 'Affect', p. 10.

³⁹ In particular, I refer to the kind of productions staged by *Teatro por la Identidad* (Theatre for Identity). As mentioned in the Introduction, since 2001 this group of theatre-makers stands as the 'artistic branch' of the *Abuelas* of Plaza de Mayo bringing together actors, directors, choreographers. See p. 26.

⁴⁰ In the original: 'No quería hacer una obra de gente llorando. Hubiera sido demagógico y yo no quería una obra melancólica. No quería repetir lo que ya existe en las organizaciones de derechos humanos.'

As I learned later, as part of an explicit command of the director, actors were not allowed to cry on stage. Throughout the show, passionate musical tandems, hectic fights over the clothes or exuberant dances tend to replace tears. This is particularly clear when finishing the reading of the last letter that her father sent to her mother, Carla says: ‘My dad died four months before I was born. He was 26. When I turned 27, I thought: “now I’m older than my dad”’.⁴¹ The uncanny disturbance of life-time narratives that permeates the sequence – and extensively, Argentina’s aftermath of violence-- becomes stressed by a furious drum solo that the actor plays at the front of the stage.⁴² As Carla addressed during our interview, the scene did not become easier with repetition:

I can tell without doubt that the hands of my father have been cut off but when I have to say that he died at 26, I always feel my voice breaking. *Mi vida después* has been different from all my previous works. I have to push my feelings down instead of evoking them.⁴³

I suggest that Arias’ production transforms this disruption of biological narratives into its key atmosphere. The time machine of costumes enhances this dislocation of reproductive accounts of kinship. Moreover, it reminds the audience that time does not necessarily move ‘steadily forward’, but rather can experience unpredictable enfolding and unfolding, as Carolyn Dinshaw addresses in a discussion on queer temporality.⁴⁴ In these terms, I argue that the same forceful instruction that prevented the actors from making visible their emotions on stage finally created a hushed sense of the collective, which defined the show in a deeper level. This contested

Para mí era muy importante que la obra pudiera tener la ironía y el humor de nuestra generación’ (my translation).

⁴¹ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

⁴² A similarly dislocated temporality was detected in the *Madres*’s claim that ‘Our children gave birth to us’ (pp. 21-22) and also Quieto’s photographic series, which proposes an uncanny encounter between forever young parents and mature offspring (pp. 65-67).

⁴³ In the original: ‘Puedo decir sin problemas que a mi papá le cortaron las manos, pero cuando tengo que decir que murió a los 26 siempre siento que se me quiebra la voz. Esta experiencia fue totalmente distinta a mis trabajos anteriores. Tengo que contener toda emoción en lugar de evocarla’ (my translation).

⁴⁴ Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman and Roderick Ferguson, ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13. 2-3 (2007), 177-195 (p. 185).

combination of affects managed to create a certain *attuning* of the bodies on stage.

Moreover, this singular affective tonality foregrounded by Arias' production emerges entwined within certain operations of technology, which also craft a generational platform to invest and unsettle the past. The recurrent use of cameras, screens, live alteration of images work as main scenic sources that corrupt traditional forms of documentary theatre. These devices create an autonomous sense of time that, far from a frivolous game, works as a form of memory prosthetic through which the younger generation reclaims an active role in the production of their own selves and others. The particular use of technology also sheds light on material conditions of existence that belong exclusively to this generation of actors, which were not thinkable during their parents' youth. I contend that this singular entanglement of humour and technology finally staged the conditions of possibility of the performance itself. Even when each sequence focuses on one actor's personal story, the audience can follow the entire troupe manipulating pictures, borrowing bodies to enact others' memories, and ultimately blurring the boundaries between one and another. Thereby, the audience witnesses not singular stories, but a collective assemblage that resonates through the actors in an affective experience of body-to-body transmission. This collective machine of affects underpins the show and suggests a novel exchange between individual loss and public trauma. This collective assemblage of bodies exceeds familial transmission bringing to the fore new generational desires. In this 'non-verbal' sense, the piece also 'speaks for itself'.

Still, I do not wish to suggest that this generational platform to invest the past was a 'natural' response from the side of the descendants. Rather, it was the 'artifice' that Arias' production strove to create, which finally went beyond intentions. In so doing, the show brought to the stage a form of sociality that can be read in tune with Patricia Clough's intervention in the aforementioned publication on affect studies. In the afterword of the edition, Clough argues that the very idea of 'sociality' should be thought of as 'a matter of affective transmission across bodies in a mechanical assemblage with technology and technical arrangements'.⁴⁵ Drawing on this, I suggest that Arias' production had the rare ability to highlight the intimate connection among

⁴⁵ Clough, Patricia, 'Afterword: The Future of Affect Studies', *Body & Society*, 16.1 (2010), 222–230 (p. 225).

humour, subjectivity and technology, which permeates Argentina's aftermath of violence. In so doing, it managed to rethink the relationship of affect and trauma by deploying a time machine of memory, which brought to light a creative response to injury coming from the future. To this generational platform Villalba's review finally reacted.

Pictures into flesh

I would like to address a slight transgression that has been operating within my analysis, one that can be productive to reassess the concept of post-memory in the terms that Hirsch first formulated it. Although Hirsch concedes that the structure of post-memory helps to explain in which ways less affected participants become engaged with trauma, she also warns this affective form of transmission risks falling back on the familiar.⁴⁶ In my own project, I have been interested in forms of transmission that can move away from the biological normativity that has constrained the politics of memory in contemporary Argentina. In this section, I would like to explore whether Hirsch's dependence on photography as a medium of transmission might help to explain why she ultimately attaches post-memory to the tropes of the family. I contend that these critical reassessments on post-memory could be useful to address the particular fascination for the visual that has been part of the memory struggles in the country, where pictures have been privileged sources in the construction of the official archive of memory.

In fact, Hirsch argues that the regime of photography works as 'a uniquely powerful medium for the transmission of events that remain unimaginable'.⁴⁷ For her, photography not only allows the viewer to see but also to *touch* the past. She writes that family photos tend to become 'screens' that resemble 'spectres reanimating their dead subjects with indexical and iconic force'.⁴⁸ In this context, it is important to bear in mind that Hirsch's concept of post-memory draws on Roland Barthes' famous concept of the 'punctum', whose first example develops the trope of the maternal loss. In fact, the fantastic line of light that suddenly links the viewer to an image begins for

⁴⁶ Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory' p. 108.

⁴⁷ Hirsch, 'The Generation of Post-memory', p. 108.

⁴⁸ Hirsch, 'The Generation of Post-memory', p. 116.

Barthes in front of a picture of a woman wearing a necklace that reminds him of the one that his mother used to wear.⁴⁹ Moreover, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes the photographic punctum as a projected ‘umbilical cord’.⁵⁰ I suggest that this bloodline inscription remains elusively present in Hirsch’s formulation of post-memory. Although it might be expanded and projected among less implicated viewers, it is always ready to ‘fall back’ to the familiar, as the scholar herself recognises.

By contrast, my reading of Arias’ production explores what happens when photography loses its autonomy as genre and becomes part of the embodied face-to-face encounter proposed by theatre. I argue that in this shared space and time, performance can become a productive medium for the circulation of traumatic memories that, different from photography, can contribute to break with familial languages. In particular, I contend that *Mi vida después* offers an exceptional case to challenge the familial foundation of the notion of post-memory. The case seems to be particularly appropriate since Arias’ production also departed from pictures. This is how the director acknowledged this fact:

The show started by looking at family pictures together and thinking of the enigmas that everyone has about one’s own childhood. These enigmas become stuck to these images.⁵¹

After that initial moment of exploration, pictures are put into flesh on stage. The show creates a new assemblage in which childhood images become contrasted, subverted and interrogated in their moments of awkwardness. The audience can follow, for instance, the actors scratching the faces of Vanina’s relatives on a gigantic screen, adding artificial moustaches signalling their credentials as policemen. An indiscreet red arrow also disturbs the picture of Liza’s mother, eight months pregnant, to denounce a pack of cigarettes lying next to her while she sunbathes at the edge of a swimming pool. These seemingly minor interventions shed light on critical

⁴⁹ Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Post-memory’, p.123.

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 80.

⁵¹ In the original: ‘El proceso de armado del show comenzó mirando todas esas fotografías juntos y reflexionando sobre los enigmas que cada uno tiene en relación a su infancia. Muchos de esos enigmas están pegado a esas imágenes’ (my translation).

dissections of family albums on the part of the descendants. Projected onto screens, the images become part of an expanded theatrical forum. In this sense, *Mi vida después* corrupts photography as a pre-established autonomous genre. The episodes that finally reach the stage seem to emerge from an abject wardrobe, as if the unconscious of photography were forced to reveal the long-term secrecies and oscillating textures silently contained within childhood images. In so doing, those pictures are infused with new and urgent demands, which entangle multiple temporalities on stage.

As many scholars have noticed, since the *Madres* began to use pictures of their missing children, the associations of the relatives but also diverse activists and artists have followed this tradition.⁵² As addressed in Chapter 1, Diana Taylor frames this visual presentation of the victims as a form of ‘DNA of performance’, a public paradigm in which the scientific and the performative become knotted (pp. 44-45).⁵³ Family albums and ID images are part of the official repertoire of memory. Even independent artists remained faithful to this tradition. To some extent, loss and lineage appeared to be tied in Argentina’s post-dictatorship by a similar ‘umbilical cord’ to those that haunt Barthes’s punctum and Hirsch’s considerations on post-memory. In recent years, however, this bloodline tradition has begun to be contested. My project addresses this transition. Moreover, I suggest that *Mi vida después* brings this normative repertoire on stage to propose a collective dissection of its authority. Whilst proposing a contamination among genres, family albums are corrupted as ‘unique’ repertoires of loss. In this theatrical forum, pictures share the power of evidence with fictional sections that include dreams or fantasies where the actors imagine their own deaths. In this sense, Arias’ show queers the material evidence to provide a singular response to trauma. The DNA of performance is countersigned on stage.

I wish to suggest that this operation proposes a critical framework to engage with

⁵² See Ana Longoni, ‘Fotos y siluetas: dos estrategias en la representacion de los desaparecidos’ in *Los desaparecidos en la Argentina. Memorias, representaciones e ideas* (1983-2008), ed. by Emilio Crenzel, (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2010), pp. 43-65. An English version translated by Yaiza Hernández can be found in *Afterall* (Autumn/Winter 20010) <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.25/photographs-and-silhouettes-visual-politics-in-the-human-rights-movement-of-argentina> (pp. 1-7) [accessed 10 August 2011]

⁵³ Diana Taylor, *The Archive of the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 175.

post-memorial meditations. While putting the pictures into flesh, *Mi vida después* opens the structure of transmission beyond the borders of the family. In this displaced environment, the ‘punctum’ softens its bloodline foundation to provide sharp piercing in both sides of the stage. In this context, the pictures that were once part of innocent childhood albums can also experience ominous turns. I shall provide a new example to illustrate this.

The baby-bath

I would like to focus on a specific picture. It was taken in 1978, at the height of the dictatorial period. It shows a smiling middle-aged woman giving a bath to a new-born baby in the living room of an ordinary home. Standing next to the woman, a girl stares at the scene. For some reason, she looks like a spy, as if she were witnessing a spectacle in which she had no part to play. While the audience examines the picture projected on a big screen, Vanina explains:

This is me when I was three, watching my mum bathe my brother. In the photo you can see that I’m happy but confused, I don’t quite understand where my brother came from, because I don’t remember seeing my mum pregnant.⁵⁴

More than three decades later, the ostensibly blameless picture comes back on stage. Like a fleeting Benjaminian recollection, the scene of the baby-bath flashes back to reveal the secrecies that were not known at the moment that it was taken. Now that Vanina knows that this baby is not her biological brother, the poignancy of the image is highlighted. It shows how the resonances of military violence permeated everyday lives, while linking the intimate with the public and proposing a backwards connection with the net of complicity which pervaded Falco’s home. Furthermore, the baby-bath picture also reconfigures the actor’s relationship to her own childhood, when she used to be ‘dad’s favourite’. It becomes the touchstone of a previous life that had finished by the end of 2003, when her alleged brother ran the DNA test that confirmed that he was the son of an activist couple. The baby in the picture now bears

⁵⁴ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

his original name: Juan Cabandié. He is the same young man who stood next to former President Kirchner during the ESMA's civil recovery in 2004: 'I am my birth parents', Cabandié argued that evening (p. 23).

I suggest that within the theatre, a single photo can be conceived as a document in which evidence is at the same time hidden and revealed. It shows, as Benjamin argues, the extent to which 'nothing is lost for history'.⁵⁵ The picture of the baby bath carries an image of the past that is still looking for redemption. This demand becomes iterated each time that Vanina brings it back on stage, as if the pervasive 'here and now' of theatre could work as a progressive chain of judgement days. In this respect, I propose that Arias' performance offers a fascinating example of the relation of theatre to the world. In fact, the show eventually helped to change the story. When Cabandié discovered that his identity had been falsified, he took his abductor to court. Despite previous legislation preventing descendants from testifying against their parents, a judge considered that Vanina's part in *Mi vida después* was enough of a precedent. In December 2009 she testified against her father.⁵⁶ Ironically, the intervention of the three-year-old girl of the picture was crucial for Luis Falco's imprisonment. In this sense, Arias' production not only brought real lives on stage. It also contributed to the forging of an alternative future. The case stands as an excruciating example of the ways in which performance can influence the law or promote social and political change.

From first-hand to 'accidental tourists'

Drawing upon the same picture of the baby-bath, I would like to consider a heated discussion that underpins current debates in Argentina including scholars and activists. It mainly concerns whether Hirsch's meditations on post-memory and second generations can be translated from the Holocaust's descendants to the aftermath of mass violence in contemporary Argentina, and even broadly. This problem becomes particularly pressing since some local descendants resist being

⁵⁵ Benjamin, 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History', p. 246.

⁵⁶ This judicial decision, which was taken on 23 December 2009, was not only crucial for Vanina's case but also enabled other abducted children to present cases against their parents. See <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/soy/1-1283-2010-03-21.html> [accessed 10 August 2011]

considered as ‘second generations’ claiming for qualifying as victims by themselves. In fact, a recent initiative tries to incorporate the category of ‘*niño desaparecido-detenido*’ (‘Disappeared-Arrested-Child’) within the current legal framework.⁵⁷ As the image of three-year-old Vanina reveals, some of those who are now in their thirties were actual witnesses of those traumatic events. Although their recollections might be fragmentary, many of these current young adults were present at the moment of their parents’ kidnapping, were kidnapped with them or were born in captivity at clandestine detention centres. In all these cases, the categories of ‘second generation’ or ‘second witnesses’ do not seem to be completely accurate.

Even so, I contend that the concept of post-memory remains politically relevant to address the memory debates that are currently taking place in Argentina. This not only refers to the ‘imaginative investment’ and the creative ways in which the younger generations have managed to present their visions of the past. Rather, as Jens Andermann suggests, post-memory becomes especially productive when exploring the ‘witnessing and empathic adoption of the trauma of the first generation by subsequent ones’.⁵⁸ In the Argentine context, this perspective can make vital contributions to an understanding of how the experience of trauma can be adopted in the context of spectatorship, and made available to others, while remaining critical towards familial narratives. This process does not only concern first hand-witnesses, but rather any accidental spectator who engages, for instance, with the uncanny vibrations of an old picture that takes over the stage. In those occasions, the affects constituted on the basis of performance can frame collective emotions and subjectivities. The fleeting form of intimacy constructed between actors and spectators finally shows how post-memory can also work as an intra-generational mechanism for the adoption of trauma, once the ‘real’ of performance emerges. Certainly, the ‘real’ refers here less to the ‘true stories’ presented by the actors than to the collective event created by the performance itself. Spectators may not have been directly affected by violence, but still they can adopt those stories and fill them with their own personal experiences. In those cases, both inter and -intra generational

⁵⁷ The leader of this initiative is Angela Urondo, a writer and one of the main referent within the descendants. See Victoria Ginzberg, ‘Por primera vez el estado me está devolviendo algo’, *Página 12*, 9 October 2011, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-178549-2011-10-09.html> [accessed 12 October 2011]

⁵⁸ Jens Andermann, ‘Returning to the Site of Horror: The Recovery of Clandestine Concentration Camps in Argentina’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 29.1 (2012, forthcoming), n.p.

forms of transmission become stressed as a form of commonality, which contributes to the on-going process of ‘working through’ the experience of mourning.

Through others’ eyes

To test the ways in which theatre can work as the unexpected space for the adoption of trauma, I would like to refer to an episode that took place when a survivor from a detention camp attended *Mi vida después*. One evening, director and crew came to know that a man who had lost his wife and a son during the military regime was seated in the venue. This is how Arias recalled that night:

I was in panic. I was afraid that the man could feel that the piece was irreverent and could get hurt. After the show, he told me that, for the first time, he could laugh about what had happened to him. ‘I could laugh and I could see the story through your eyes’, he said. This was the best thing he could ever tell me.⁵⁹

The episode offers an incidental case study to examine how a direct victim could fruitfully engage with the particular view of a director who does not have direct connection with the missing. It finally addresses a mysterious encounter that took place at that threshold area in-between the stage and the audience. Drawing upon the survivor’s expression, I suggest that Arias’ production offered him the opportunity to see, live and feel through ‘other’s eyes’. By this, I do not mean that the show, or any theatrical performance, can assist in the process of individual healing. I only contend that this case reveals how theatre may expand the capacity to feel from the perspective of others. In this sense, I contend that *Mi vida después* managed to bridge traditional barriers among those usually considered as victims and those who apparently were not. To address this point further, I would like to draw attention to Joe Kelleher’s exploration of theatre and politics, where he argues that the very condition of theatre, of ‘any theatre at all’, is to become ‘estranged’.⁶⁰ He writes:

⁵⁹ In the original: ‘Esa noche estaba en pánico. Tenía miedo que pudiera sentir que la obra era irreverente y que pudiera salir herido. Cuando terminó la función, vino a verme y me dijo que por primera vez en su vida se había podido reír de que le había pasado. “Me pude reír y ver la historia a través de tus ojos”, dijo. Fue lo mejor que pudo haberme dicho’ (my translation).

⁶⁰ Joe Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2009), p. 61.

[theatre] It is a place too, we tell our friend, where every action that is performed appears planned out or scripted in advance, at least to an extent. This produces a strange effect, we say, in that the people who are coming and going across the space – let's call them the actors – seem to have all the freedom in the world to do whatever they like, even the freedom not to do anything at all. But at the same time they seem constrained, as if all their choices are somehow being made for them somewhere else, and as if every move they make is basically a renewed attempt to deal with this peculiar situation.⁶¹

Drawing upon this, I suggest that *Mi vida después* stresses the 'estrangement' inevitably involved in theatre. It does so partly because the people we see 'coming and going across the space' do nothing but act their own lives: they are actors acting themselves. This does not mean that feelings of constraint disappear. Rather, the performers still need to adjust to a script that has been written somewhere else. They might have been selected because of the common condition of being professional actors, but they are still subjected to rules; the rules of remaking their own lives and also the lives of others. They have been dressed and scripted, they have been told to act as little as possible. They have been instructed to perform their own selves in a neutral tone, as if there were no emotions involved; they have been told not to cry. Keeping their names on stage, the actors directly address an audience that bears witness in the darkness. The artificiality of drama seems to have been removed. Apparently, the only thing there 'to be seen' is real stories. Precisely, under these conditions, the 'estrangement' of theatre becomes highlighted. Still, this argument can be taken a step further. While considering the kind of illusion or disillusion that takes place in front of 'performers who might not be *acting* at all', Kelleher argues that the form of estrangement mobilised by theatre should be conceived as 'a way of thinking about the possibility of a politics –at least in theatre- of *non*-relation.'⁶² In this sense, he contends that theatre brings to the foreground the possibility of learning

⁶¹ Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics*, pp. 61-62.

⁶² Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics*, p. 64. Kelleher's emphasis.

something about ourselves ‘as for the first time’.⁶³

With this framework in mind, I would like to go back to the case of the spectator who lost his family during the dictatorship. As mentioned, the survivor acknowledged having seen ‘through other’s eyes’ during Arias’ performance. I would like to suggest that he also learned something about himself ‘as if for the first time’. It was actually a form of knowledge that emerged at the time of the performance, while he was watching a younger generation re-making stunt episodes of their parents’ youths. The survivor confessed that he laughed that night during the show. In some peculiar way, he was also *entertained*. Far from any triviality, Kelleher argues that in theatre to ‘entertain’ means to offer ‘hospitality to someone, to make them your guests, to hold them in your welcome in the way you might hold an idea in your mind’.⁶⁴ Indeed, I propose that *Mi vida después* provided this ex-captive with the possibility of engaging with his own trauma as if it were for ‘the first time’. He was ‘held’ and ‘welcomed’ in a different narrative of grief. This process was primarily political since it also enabled him to see from the perspective of others, those who were not directly affected by violence. In fact, while pushing further the connections between theatre and politics, Kelleher argues:

What would appear to be at stake for both politics and theatre are the very activities of showing and saying through which some are made visible who would otherwise have ‘no business’ being seen and others get to speak who would not, in ‘normal’ circumstances, count as speaking beings.⁶⁵

In these terms, I wish to make the case that Arias’ piece is mainly dedicated to entertaining *strangers*, those who have been traditionally excluded from discourses of mourning, and that in ‘normal circumstances’ would not become involved or even count as ‘speaking beings’. For the first time, Arias’ production plays the part of those who have not experienced the rights of remembering in a post-dictatorial Argentina. In this political context, this performance develops a way of ‘showing and saying’ for

⁶³ Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics*, p. 65.

⁶⁴ Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics*, p. 65.

⁶⁵ Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics*, p. 68.

those who seemingly have ‘no business’ within the local experience of loss. Also in this sense, Arias’ piece ‘speaks for it self’. And it does so, on behalf of those who seemingly do not have the ‘right’ to speak, those who lack *pedigree* and, thereby, do not have the most ‘interesting’ roles within the current discourses of memory. In this way, *Mi vida después* shows how seemingly underestimated subjects of politics can have surprising things to say, if they are allowed to step into ‘main’ roles. They can then also ‘entertain’ others and be ‘entertained’ by others. They can hold and host their audiences within non-normative discourses that intersect, twist and displace conventional acts of mourning. In this movement, Arias’ production appears as a prominent political space where alternative social relations can be created and re-enacted in unforeseen ways. In doing so, *Mi vida después* provides a new hospitality, a non-biological narrative of grief that can be shared and transmitted among those who have not been directly touched by violence. Moreover, as the experience of the survivor witnesses, this process of ‘estrangement’ can also offer a blissful surprise even to those usually considered to be direct victims.

Kelleher suggests that theatre’s job could be to imagine ‘other, paradoxical worlds’.⁶⁶ By displacing normative discourses governed by the ‘wounded family’, *Mi vida después* also works in that direction. In doing so, it helps to consider the productivity of post-memory as a form of adoption of trauma, one that is not necessarily confined to second generations but open to all kinds of witnesses, waiting to be entertained while sitting together in darkness. This situation stresses the estrangement between politics and performance *out of* theatre, and *beyond* theatre, which fosters opportunities for building more inclusive political communities. In this sense, *Mi vida después* makes visible how strangers can exchange roles, costumes and emotions in broader scenarios. In so doing, it works as a reminder that theatre will be always attached to the possibility of building alternative worlds, which come to interrupt ‘whatever is taken for granted’.⁶⁷

Close

On 30 September 2011, *Mi vida después* had its last national performance at *La*

⁶⁶ Kelleher, *Theatre and Politics*, p. 72.

⁶⁷ Kelleher, *Theatre and Politics*, p. 72.

Carpintería.⁶⁸ The small venue located in Abasto, a newly gentrified district of Buenos Aires, was crowded. After three years, the show had become an uneasy self-reflective object, which not only mutated alongside the actors involved in it, but also created new emergences. In fact, in early 2012, Arias will stage the Chilean version of *Mi vida después*.⁶⁹ The new show, entitled *El año que nací* (*The Year I was Born*), will feature Chilean actors engaging with the traces of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1990). More than considering Arias' production as a brand-new 'franchise', I suggest that its expanded versions addresses how a theatrical artifact can eventually become an affective vehicle for 'working through' disparate and geographically dislocated traumas.

The night of the last performance in Buenos Aires the atmosphere was hectic. Although most of the public had already seen the show, the collective intensity was reminiscent of a gig. That night was also Ismael's debut on stage, Mariano's second son. The cheerful and erratic presence of the three-year old child playing next to his brother further enhanced the precipitated feeling of time that circulated throughout the venue. Ismael's figure appeared before me as a fantastic 'emergence', even a self-creation of the show itself. To some extent, that last performance was the end of an era, the final stage of a three-year journey in which the actors might have gained adult credentials. For me, it was also the end of my fieldwork for my three-year doctoral project.

Towards the end, the actors sat as usual on a big sofa. Vanina, the daughter of the police officer, was in the middle. In her hands, she had the records of the trial that her brother initiated against her father: the forged ID, the forged birth certificate, DNA analysis, the police file, and legal statements. By the last performance, Falco was already judged. Following Varnina's testimony, on 18 May 2011, he was sentenced to 18 years imprisonment, the harshest punishment that had ever been applied to an appropriator.⁷⁰ 'The saddest thing is that he's still my dad', said the actor on stage.⁷¹

⁶⁸ In December 2011 Arias' production was presented at the Theatre des Abbesses in Paris.

⁶⁹ The new production draws on a workshop for Chilean artists held by Lola Arias in the 2011's edition of the festival 'Santiago a Mil', where local actors began to construct a collective album of their biographical stories. For further information see the website of the festival, <http://www.santiagoamil.cl/es/?p=7835> [accessed 23 December 2011]

⁷⁰ Victoria Ginzberg, 'Con la condena más alta para un apropiador', *Página 12*, 18 May 2011, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-168409-2011-05-18.html> [accessed 11 October 2011]

In this gripping context, the seemingly irrelevant fact of the actors sitting together on the same couch came to my attention. They were all very close to each other. In an uncanny way the choreographic disposition of the scene reminded me of a family picture. Still, that ‘picture’ did not correspond to any traditional album. The crew enacted a spectral community that helped to conceive a broader idea of being affected by violence. By stressing the ‘estrangement’ of performing their own stories, the actors welcomed the audience in a narrative of mourning that hosted unexpected affiliations emerging from loss.

Mi vida después finished as it started: with clothes. The last scene showed an empty row of chairs. After a final fight over the clothes, the actors gently ‘dressed’ those chairs. The image suggested a gesture of care towards those missing. Even so, in front of those clothed furniture, I thought that the parents were secretly left naked. To some extent, their offspring got rid of their customs. The crew did not play as stunts any longer. Even so, the time machine had not stopped. It never does. The affective materiality of costumes exposes how traumatic pasts not only travel in a biological line but can also be adopted by occasional tourists in the communal context of theatre. In so doing, *Mi vida después* suggests how loss can be a form of attire that comes as a gift from the past, which less affected audiences can also *wear* as if ‘for the first time’. In this sense, Arias’ show reworks post-memorial transmission as a form of cross-dressing experience that might also create new characters for the future.

⁷¹ Arias, *My Life After* (2008), n.p.

Family, Politics and Emotions: *Los topos* and Kirchner's Death

Introduction

In the final chapter of this thesis, I would like to propose an analysis of *Los topos* (*The Moles*, 2008), a novella written by the Argentine author Félix Bruzzone, both of whose parents were murdered during the dictatorship. Although the biography of the author seems to continue the tradition that stipulates that only those who were 'directly affected' by violence are entitled to the rights of remembering, I will make the case that *Los topos* works as a counter performance to the idea of the 'wounded family' as the only victim of the military violence. In these terms, I will show how *Los topos* provides a queer, insurgent and ironic version of the performance of blood, one that suggests a more fluid entanglement among kinship, loss and political heritage.

My proposal is to read Bruzzone's novella alongside the radicalisation of the struggles around the past, which emerged in the country since Cristina Fernández de Kirchner took office in 2007. I will argue that Bruzzone's book can be read as an enhanced response to the black humour that permeated H.I.J.O.S.' organisation during the mid-1990s, at the same time that it assesses the contradictions and limitations of a politics of mourning when it becomes officialised. Finally, I will make the case that Bruzzone's fiction not only prefigured the affective environment that surrounded Nestor Kirchner's death in October 2010, but also envisaged the expanded language of kinship that is currently in play in contemporary Argentina.

Critical distance, a 'killjoy' obsession

Bruzzone's parents were both activists in guerrilla group *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo*. After their kidnapping, Bruzzone grew up with his grandparents in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. Although the author was never part of H.I.J.O.S., his work has focused obsessively on the drama of the children of the disappeared. In fact,

during an interview that I conducted in April 2009, he argued:

I was about to join H.I.J.O.S. but in the end I thought that I did not need to. I am not interested in a vindictive perspective. Literature does not work like that. Literature needs to address different kinds of problems.¹

In fact, Bruzzone has cultivated a strict personal discipline to remain faithful to this independent artistic perspective. He lives in a suburb of Buenos Aires with his wife and son, and cleans swimming pools in a wealthy neighbourhood for a living. On a daily basis, he follows this experience of personal detachment through a personal blog, entitled 'The one who cleans swimming pools.'² In this way, Bruzzone keeps 'healthy' distance from conventional debates in the field of memory. Despite this apparent isolation, his recognition as a writer has been expanding internationally. In 2010 he was invited as a 'guest of honour' to attend the Frankfurt Book Fair where he received the Anna Seghers' Award. In 2010, his first book, *76* (2007), an autobiographical collection of short stories, and *Los topos* were translated into French and German.³

In the following pages, I will argue that the wild spirit that underscores Bruzzone's book endorses a surprising turn within the narratives of grief. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's critique of normative forms of happiness, I suggest that *Los topos* can be read as *killjoy* narrative of the 'happy scripts' supported by the associations of the relatives, a provocative response that comes from its most deviant son.⁴ Moreover, I argue that Bruzzone could be conceived as a double agent within the narrative of the victims; in particular, the black slang developed by H.I.J.O.S.. Broadly, *Los topos* sheds light on those guilty pleasures that remained mostly confined to the selected circle of the 'orphans'. As the main character argues, 'even the purest organisations can be spied on from the inside'.⁵ Drawing on this ambiguous position, I will analyse

¹ In the original: 'Estuve a punto de entrar a H.I.J.O.S. pero al final pensé que no lo necesitaba. No me interesa la perspectiva reivindicativa. La literatura no funciona de esa manera. Necesita dar cuenta de problemas diferentes' (my translation). My interview with Félix Bruzzone was conducted on 21 April 2009 in Buenos Aires. Unless indicated, the quotes included in this chapter belong to this talk.

² In the original: 'El que limpia las piletas'. See <http://www.barrefondo.blogspot.com/> [accessed 31 January 2011]

³ See http://www.fu-berlin.de/en/presse/fup/2010/fup_10_348/index.html [accessed 20 January 2011]

⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 59.

⁵ In the original: 'Hasta las organizaciones mas puras pueden ser espiadas desde adentro' (Bruzzone,

the novella as a sharp and excruciating caricature of the wretched characters of the ‘wounded family’. In the context of my project, Bruzzone’s fiction provides me with an extra opportunity: the possibility of analysing the unconventional forms of intimacy that emerged in the aftermath of violence from my oblique perspective of a ‘deviant’ daughter; after all, another infiltrator within the bloodline narratives of grief.

Making fun of the ‘wounded family’

As with the rest of Bruzzone’s fictions, *Los topos* draws from the author’s personal experience. The central character has also lost both parents during the repression and lives with his grandparents in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. He does not seem to identify with the figure of the ‘son’ and follows with scepticism his grandmother’s anxieties around his parents’ disappearance. The elder matriarch, named ‘Lela’, is somehow convinced that her missing daughter gave birth to a second child while she was held captive at ESMA. When her husband dies, Lela moves opposite the detention centre to undertake a daily search for her supposed second grandchild.

An odd sense of humour corrodes this preliminary scene. Lela’s character (which reads as *silly* in Spanish) seems to be endorsing an irreverent recitation of *Abuelas’* activism and the group’s search for the babies stolen during the dictatorship. The novella seems to take place during the late 1990s, H.I.J.O.S.’ ‘gold years’. In this sense, Lela’s shouts in front of ESMA could appear as a sort of eccentric and untimely performance; especially since, by that time, the abducted children were already in their twenties and not likely to be at the former camp, which in 2004 was declared a ‘space of memory’ and is progressively becoming a ‘Human Rights City’, as considered in Chapter 3.

Eventually, the protagonist starts dating Romina, a sweet young woman who joins H.I.J.O.S. as a devoted gesture of commitment towards the narrator’s traumatic past. The woman endlessly tries to talk him into following her in this decision, contending that among other descendants he will find the companionship he needs. Her insistence does not convince him. The protagonist has strong feeling against the *escraches*, the

Los topos (Buenos Aires: Mondadori, 2008), p. 65 (my translation).

celebrated form of activism developed by the descendants during the 1990s:

The *escraches*, for instance, were for me a form of revenge, law taken into one's own hands, something that interests me very much but perhaps because of cowardice, or idiocy, or intelligence, I've been unable to put it into practice. Sometimes I thought of borrowing Lela's car, selling it, buying a *Falcon* [the type of cars that were used by the military while conducting the kidnaps], and gathering some friends to go out kidnapping military personnel.⁶

As analysed in Chapter 1, H.I.J.O.S.' public interventions, targeting the military repressors in their own locations, worked as a gesture of moral condemnation in the absence of legal justice (pp. 44-46). *Los topos* introduces an ostensibly ironic version of this form of activism: the *escraches* are reduced to a mere impulse of revenge, which is deliberately turned back on the perpetrators. The transgression is flagrant. The operation counts as a rich example of 'subversive iteration', in the terms developed by Judith Butler who argues that 'it is precisely the repetition of the play that establishes as well the instability of the very category that it constitutes.'⁷ Bruzzone's deviant recitation of the *escraches* is all the more poignant since it is envisaged by using the same means that the military forces applied during the dictatorship, the *Falcon*, the green cars that still remain as the most ostensible symbol of state repression.

This subversive operation can be also witnessed in the way in which the narrator condemns his girlfriend's decision to join H.I.J.O.S.. Not only does he argue that there were no real victims in Romina's family, but also he contends that they did not even know what 'the issue of the disappeared was about'.⁸ In so doing, *Los topos* sardonically acknowledges the hierarchy of blood championed by the descendant and addresses with cruel irony the question of who bears the legitimacy of remembering

⁶ In the original: 'Eso de los escraches, por ejemplo, eran para mí una forma de revancha o de justicia por mano propia, algo muy de mi interés pero que por cobardía, o idiotez, o inteligencia, nunca concretaba. A veces hasta pensaba en pedirle a Lela los papeles del auto [...] venderlo, comprar un Falcon y salir con mis amigos a secuestrar militares' (Bruzzone, *Los topos*, p. 17) (my translation).

⁷ Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', *Inside/Out*, ed. by Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 13-31 (p.18).

⁸ Bruzzone, *Los topos*, p.16.

in Argentina. The provocation goes even further. Romina's feelings of empathy with the descendants make the protagonist reflect with scorn:

I don't know how things are between her and her mother, but the first thing that struck me was that this lady should not like to see her daughter becoming an activist in an organisation for people without parents.⁹

The book is fully embedded in this malicious mood. As a cynical H.I.J.O.S.' double agent, the protagonist highlights the apparent contradiction of being part of the group without bearing the status of the victim. Certainly, as also commented in Chapter 1, the question of whether or not accepting those with no victims in their families –the so-called 'open population' resulted in the group splitting in 1999 (pp. 53-54). In this way, *Los topos* laughs at the idea of 'pedigree' that regulated the group's internal hierarchies. For instance, echoing and displacing one of the on-going jokes of the group, the narrator suggests that the right moment for joining H.I.J.O.S. is close to Mothers' Day, to provide accurate commemoration to the missing parent.¹⁰ In this way, the recursive black humour that was once part of H.I.J.O.S. is transformed into *Los topos*' corrosive method, which Bruzzone satirically turns back on its 'creators'. Thus, his book not only provides a powerful critique of the descendants' rituals but also of any secure narrative championed by the relatives. For instance, while referring to a young woman member of H.I.J.O.S., whose aunt was kidnapped, the protagonist suggests:

It would have been great for her to join Romina, so as they could both found *SOBRINOS* [Nephews & Nieces], *NUERAS* [Daughters in Law]¹¹

In this way, *Los topos* teases the obsession with kinship titles that lies at the core of the relatives. By proposing new branches within the genealogical tree of victims, it disturbs the feelings of property and the fantasy of unity that lies at the core of the

⁹ In the original: 'No sé cómo están las relaciones entre ella y su madre, pero lo primero que se me ocurrió fue que a la señora la militancia en H.I.J.O.S. no debía gustarle, que no tenía por qué padecer que su hija militara en una organización de personas sin padres' (Bruzzone, *Los topos*, p. 21) (my translation).

¹⁰ Bruzzone, *Los topos*, p. 21.

¹¹ In the original: 'Hubiera sido bueno que se juntara con Romina y fundaran SOBRINOS, NUERAS, no sé' (Bruzzone, *Los topos*, p. 18) (my translation).

family of relatives. Bruzzone's fiction pokes fun at this bloodline cast of survivors and portrays it as a caricaturized 'self-help club' of victims. Following on from this, *Los topos* proposes an expanded version of the 'wounded family', which should, from now on, not only include *mothers*, *grandmothers*, *children* and *siblings* of the disappeared, but also *nieces* and *nephews*, and, why not, the *mothers-in-law*.

A new sequence of the comical

In December 2007 Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's took office as the new president. Her administration witnessed a new stage in the revision of the past, which included a flirtation with a revolutionary rhetoric of the 1970's. In this context, many former members of H.I.J.O.S. were called to work for the governmental bureaucracy. Mostly hired as human rights *experts*, former activists now in their mid thirties were placed in the role of 'double agents': they became public servants of a state that officialised the demands of memory and justice.¹² Facing this 'institutional' time of mourning, *Los topos* shows its sardonic teeth.

As if teasing the mundane contingencies of being part of the state, the novella looks backwards to examine H.I.J.O.S.' radical years. For instance, the book picks up the discussion around the reparation funds offered by the democratic governments from 1994. As I explored in Chapter 1 (p. 59), the uses of this controversial money have been a pervasive source of discomfort and also jokes within the organisation. Still, Bruzzone pushes these boundaries further. He depicts his characters using the 'reparative money' to pay for abortions, sex, travels to exotic beaches, or funding eccentric research such as the development of cigarettes that can be smoked in the rain. *Los topos* also mocks the descendants' passionate vindication of the parental activism. In so doing, the book manages to envisage the extent to which this belligerent spirit was re-launched during Fernández de Kirchner's administration, mainly through 'La Cámpora', the youngest and most enthusiastic branch of the official party, which gained a new centrality during the period.

¹² This new team was strongly connected was greeted by the media as the 'under-35'. See Nicolás Llantos, 'Los sub-35', *Página 12*, 9 January 2011, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-160147-2011-01-09.html> [accessed 23 December 2012]

As a fine caricaturist of the group, Bruzzone not only teases H.I.J.O.S.' secret rituals but he also magnifies and makes visible its moments of failure and contradiction. If humour enabled H.I.J.O.S. to reverse individual experiences of shame, *Los topes* shows how humour also worked in the group to confirm the prerogatives of the victims. By contrast, I argue, *Los topes* calls the entire frame into question: it offers a non-biological response to descendants' drama, which reverses the legitimacy of blood. In the following sections, I will show how this new sequence of the comical is enhanced by a queer turn.

In the name of the (queer) son

At an early stage of the plot, the relationship between the protagonist and Romina comes to an end. The protagonist mourns his loss looking for sex in the red light district of Buenos Aires. That is how he meets Maira, a transvestite sex worker. The encounter eventually leads to 'the greatest and more beautiful love.'¹³ This romantic twist in the story of the descendant addresses the figure of the transvestite, which, following the de-criminalisation of sex work in 1998, was at the centre of Buenos Aires' anxieties. The cross-dressing sex parades in the red-light district, firstly located in Palermo, a trendy area in the city, made visible as never before forms of non-normative sexuality to the beholders eyes.¹⁴ As Leticia Sabsay argues, 'the regulation of sexual desire implied several consequences for the definition of the public space itself and, at the same time, it implied the stabilization of the parameters through which citizenry and its rights to use urban space could be determined'.¹⁵ In a context in which the very definition of citizenry was at stake, *Los topes* plays its most defiant card: it suggests that Maira, the new girlfriend, could be the protagonist's biological brother. As uncanny as it sounds, the narrator suggests that his brand new sexual partner could also be his missing sibling who was stolen from his mother after she gave birth at ESMA. Indeed, Maira might be the latchkey kid that his granny Lela was looking for from the beginning.

¹³ In the original: 'El más grande y hermoso amor' (Bruzzone, *Los topes*, p. 34) (my translation).

¹⁴ In 2004, following the furious responses of the neighbours, a series of judicial reformulations confined the sex workers' activity to another red light district located this time in the main green urban space of the city. For further discussion on this issue, see Leticia Sabsay, 'The Limits of Democracy. Transgender sex work and citizenship', *Cultural Studies*, 25. 2 (2011), 213-229.

¹⁵ Sabsay, 'The Limits of Democracy. Transgender sex work and citizenship', p. 215.

When I interviewed Bruzzone in April 2009, I was curious about the inclusion of Maira in his novella. This character especially fascinated me, not only because it was the first queer figure to appear in the author's work, but also, and more importantly, because to my knowledge it was the first time that a queer reference was explicitly applied to address the dictatorship's heritage. This is what he told me:

In the mind of my main character there is this situation about his potential brother who might have been born at ESMA. Maira appears like a fantasy at the time he is breaking up with his girlfriend. I think he becomes attracted to Maira because he sees in these girls a problem of identity similar to the one he has. He sees in the transvestite world almost a cliché of people with identity problems. This is the sort of identification that the main character establishes. When he engages with Maira in a more affective way his own problems and suspicions are fostered, and eventually he becomes convinced that she could be his brother. However, I never thought of this story as a way of talking about travesties. Rather, I thought of it as a means to talk about the disappeared.¹⁶

In the context of my project, Bruzzone's words were revealing. The queer turn that underpinned his story was less related to a sexual role, or even to a gender disposition, than to a methodological form deployed to subvert a problem. It was not that Maira's character had no value in and of herself, but rather that the value of queerness worked as the very strategy to challenge the legacy left by the dictatorship. To some extent, I feel I identify with the author's position: my own critical framework draws from this argument.

Drawing upon this, I suggest that Maria's figure can offer a new perspective to

¹⁶ In the original: 'En la cabeza de mi personaje está a la situación del supuesto hermano que podría haber nacido en ESMA. Maira aparece como una fantasía al estar rompiendo con su novia. Creo que se siente atraído por ella porque ve en estas chicas un problema de identidad como tiene él. Encuentra en el mundo travesti un cliché de los problemas de identidad. Ese es el tipo de identificación que establece. Cuando desarrolla un vínculo más afectivo termina creyendo que es su hermano. Pero nunca pensé esta historia como algo para hablar de travestismos si no para hablar de desaparecidos' (my translation).

rethink a politics of mourning; especially since the Kirchnerist administrations have appropriated the position of the victims as their own adopted political lineage. In fact, her character can be perceived as a subversive recitation of the figure of the son, a novel operation to unseat the trajectory of the offspring of the disappeared.

My argument is twofold. On the one hand, by proposing a love story between a transvestite sex worker and a son of the disappeared, Bruzzone's novella suggests exploring the contested subjectivities constituted in response to the dictatorship's violence in tune with the trans communities recently revealed as part of the city. In so doing, Maira's character brings together the anxieties that surround the figure of the transsexual and the opacity of the figure of the abducted son. They are both injured and repudiated characters. They have both been victimised and recently they have also been politically vindicated.¹⁷ Moreover, Bruzzone's novella suggests that both figures could be biological siblings. While inviting us to read the descendants' drama alongside non-normative sexual filiations, *Los topos* also touches on the problem of falsified identities. The drama of growing up under faked names and sharing home-spaces with their appropriators (who are, further, usually accomplices in their parents' murdering) already installs a queer notion of kinship within the offspring of the missing. Maira's character re-frames the traces of shame that informs the descendants' biographies through the feelings of queer unhappiness enacted by the figure of the transsexual workers. In this vein, *Los topos* reads the conflict of contested heritages while envisioning alternative communities within the realm of kinship. In so doing, it offers a unique opportunity to examine how the biological normativity supported by human rights narratives failed to address the extended affective anxieties raised by grief.

On the other hand, I contend that Maira's figure offers a fruitful perspective to dismantle the ongoing images of the descendants, so often asphyxiated beneath the duty of memory during the Kirchnerist period. When in Argentina mourning appears to be institutionalised, *Los topos* shows how the effects of trauma cannot be reduced

¹⁷ As Sabsay notes, in the Argentine context, 'transvestite' refers either to transsexual or transgender people –passing from male to female. Although within the local culture the expression works as a pejorative term, it has also been appropriated by trans communities. The term 'transgender' begins to be incorporated in Argentina from 2000. See L. Sabsay, 'The Limits of Democracy. Transgender sex work and citizenship', footnote 4.

to trials. As already explored, from 2006 those responsible for human rights violations were brought back to court (p. 23 and pp. 4243). In these trials, H.I.J.O.S., for the first time, took the role of prosecutor. Nevertheless, compared with the effervescence of the 1990s, the number of activists decreased by 75 per cent in 2010. In this way, Maira's figure grieves H.I.J.O.S.' former activism. Her character brings to light a new constellation of desires. She emerges as an impertinent response to the attempts to sanctify the figure of the descendants. When former members 'transitioned' into public servants, or became enthusiastic Kirchnerist supporters, the novella guffaws with delight and mocks the moral arrangements prescribed by the so-called most progressive human rights politics since the return of democracy. By reinstalling the tension in relation to the heritages of the past, Bruzzone brings to light another conception of politics.

Queering the repertoire of the victims

To ground this argument further, I would like to refer to a thought-provoking comparison provided by Bruzzone while referring to his previous book, *76*, a collection of stories which also focuses on the descendants' biographies and draws from 1976, the year of his birth. He told me:

In my stories, the children of the disappeared have these abandoned buses in their heads; something that was once useful but no longer is. They are looking for something that is prior to any claim. They seek an origin, an identity, they need to know who their parents were, but that prevents them from building new families.¹⁸

As the passage shows, Bruzzone reads the imaginary of the descendants as intrinsically melancholic, incapable of getting over their loss. The image of those sinister buses that the author used to stare at in a depot near his neighbourhood seems to be echoing the missing parents. From his comparison the 'disappeared' emerge as if they were pervasively kept under a sort of vegetative state, kept alive only through a

¹⁸ In the original: 'En mis historias, en las cabezas de mis personajes hay colectivos abandonados, que en algún momento funcionaron pero ahora ya no. Están buscando algo que es previo a todo, buscan un origen, una identidad, necesitan saber quiénes fueron sus padres pero eso les impide armar otras familias' (my translation).

respirator. This confrontational position detects a sort of lethargy encrypted within H.I.J.O.S.; a stubbornness that also informs the *Madres*' circles around a square. As defiant as it sounds, Bruzzone seems to suggest a compulsive ending of melancholic ruminations around parental figures as the condition to build new affective communities. By contrast, this is how the author addressed his own broken lineage:

My parents turned out to be a lot of people: my grandma, my uncles and aunts, my cousins, my friends; people that appear in life [....] One is always searching for strange filiations. Perhaps something similar happens in literature.¹⁹

Los topos captures the atmosphere of expanded kinship that circulates around the author's personal and intellectual environment. Nonetheless, I suggest that Bruzzone's fiction also addresses the ambivalence that haunts the horizon of victims. Maira's figure also speaks about a process of mourning that is not easy to get over. To some extent, her character echoes the figure of the drag, which in Butler's perspective, 'allegorizes heterosexual melancholy'.²⁰ Drawing on this, I suggest that Maira's transsexual persona also points towards the melancholic constitution of the 'wounded family' and these other forms of attachments that remain not grieved within the bloodline normativity that it prescribes. Her obscure hopes and desires unsettle and 'transvestite' the heteronormative image of the family of relatives. Maira appears as the troublemaker at the table of victims, the killjoy of their moments of comfort. After all, she is also the one for whom there are no clear affiliations. She is the one who can be depicted as the 'non-relative' in the family of victims. To some extent, Maira embodies the notion of queerness, not only as a character but also as a method. In this sense, her figure suggests that alternative forms of mourning are also possible.

Becoming other in grief

Halfway through, *Los topos*' plot speeds up. Maira has been the victim of an

¹⁹ In the original: 'Mis padres terminaron siendo muchas personas: mi abuela, mis tíos y tías, mis primos, mis amigos; gente que apareció en mi vida ... Uno está siempre buscando filiaciones raras. Algo parecido pasa en la literatura' (my translation). See Quintín, 'Uno a uno. 'Sueño con medusas', de Félix Bruzzone', <http://www.lalectoraprovisoria.com.ar/?p=2550> [accessed 21 February 2011]

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 235.

operation similar to the kidnappings that took place during the dictatorship. Her spot has been raided, and there are no traces of her. The transvestite girlfriend (and perhaps the narrator's abducted brother) becomes a 'neo-disappeared', an intriguing condition for the democratic period, which seems to recall Julio López' fate, a retired bricklayer who disappeared after testifying at the trial against the perpetrator Miguel Etchecolatz in September 2006. In order to cope with the new loss, the protagonist moves to the south, where he becomes involved with *El Alemán* ('The German'), a conspicuous character, who is responsible for the murder of a frightening number of homosexuals.

After Maira's disappearance, the protagonist undergoes a process of plastic surgery and also embraces a transgender identity. While looking at her brand new self at the mirror, the now transgender son comments:

For a moment, I think that the one there is not me but Maira; and I even want to turn the mirror over to see if she is behind [...].²¹

The process of metamorphosis undergone by the main character seems to follow the impossible aim of occupying the place of his neo-disappeared girlfriend. Her figure of sibling-lover-alter ego does nothing but expanding the displaced images that the queer son gets in front of a perverse mirror, which entwines the multiple echoes of his-her own self. As embodying the worst of fantasies, the end of the novella finds the narrator romantically involved with *El Alemán*, the serial killer who might have murdered Maira and maybe also his parents. Moreover, the relentless impulse of contagion reaches the figure of the perpetrator, who also embraces a transgender identity and eventually becomes depicted as the *Alemán-Papá* ('German-Father').²²

Within Bruzzone's drama of inverted filiations the experience of a broken generation is transformed into an astonishing, scornful and terrifying family performance. Moreover, *Los topos*' final moment seems to suggest that past and present share a common destiny, as if Maira, the missing parents, and the father-perpetrator had grotesquely become one. As in a poignant parody of Stockholm syndrome, the

²¹ In the original: 'Por un momento pienso que la que está ahí no soy yo, que es Maira: y hasta tengo ganas de dar vuelta el espejo y ver si ella está ahí atrás' (Bruzzone, *Los topos*, p. 188) (my translation).

²² My emphasis.

narrator is not only in love with his executor but he is also captured by a past that exceeds his own story. Once again, the fantasy that seems at stake here is that of having one's own experiences 'evacuated' by a previous generation, an issue that, drawing on Marianne Hirsch's work on second generation of survivors, I have considered in relation to the Argentine descendants.²³ In this way, the narrator becomes chained to his father's fate, ultimately condemned to re-enact a frightening version of his parent's story.

How to make sense of this abject ending? What kind of disturbing arrangements can be established between the figure of the son, a transgender neo-disappeared, and a serial killer, which iterates the spectre of a missing father? Far from any kind of whim, I would like to suggest that Bruzzone's fiction deploys a displaced technology of memory that can be extremely fruitful to challenge the normative constitution of grief prescribed by the relatives. This argument needs to be addressed in different stages. First, I would like to make the case that the progressive mutation of *Los topos*' characters shows how grief inevitably implies a process of becoming other. Within her reflection on grief in the wake of September 11's anxieties, Butler writes: 'Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which cannot be known in advance.'²⁴ I would like to suggest that *Los topos* takes this transformation to a fantastic extreme. Through the successive forms of gender transitioning experienced by its characters, Bruzzone's fiction queers the fantasy of purity that lies at the core of the 'wounded family'. In so doing, it shows how the resonances of grief cannot be mastered in advance. In fact, *Los topos* never-ending parody contests not only any familiar coherence but also any regime of genealogical truth that pretends to be secure.

Still, this argument can be taken to a further stage. In her research on affects and queer subjectivities, Lisa Blackman contends that certain forms of affective becoming could be grasped as 'queer performancing', stressing the production of new subjectivities in the wake of trauma.²⁵ Drawing on this, I would like to contend that

²³ Hirsch, 'The Generation of Post-memory', p. 107.

²⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 21. Butler's emphasis.

²⁵ Lisa Blackman, 'Affect, Performance and Queer Subjectivities', *Cultural Studies*, 25. 2 (2011), 183-

Los topos provides an original framework to explore the emergence of alternative affective configurations in the aftermath of violence. Moreover, it invites the readers to negotiate unconventional forms of intimacy emerged from the experience of grief through traces of biographies similarly marked by shame and trauma. While suggesting unconventional intersections between perpetrators and victims, descendants and transvestite, *Los topos* displaces the normativity of blood. It shows how the process of becoming involved in grief can assist not only extreme but also joyful opportunities.

Batman and Robin, the queer siblings

Bruzzone's displacements are embedded in a wild sense of humour. For instance, during an early stage of the plot, the narrator confesses that he likes portraying himself and Maira as Batman and Robin. I suggest that the playful evocation of the popular super-hero couple utters the contested cases of the abducted siblings separated by violence. The queer innuendo that Bruzzone provides to the cult-comic legendary duo works to enhance the defamation of the law of kinship, performed by the displaced lineage of the disappeared descendants. In this way, Bruzzone mocks the traditional discourses of 'happy family reunion' proposed by the *Abuelas* in their search for the missing grandchildren, as addressed in the Introduction. Even more, through this camp turn in the descendant's drama, Bruzzone also anticipates the Nobles' case as addressed in the Introduction (pp. 29-30). Although the resistance of the siblings to conduct the DNA test only reached major media attention by 2010 (later than Bruzzone's book was published), Felipe and Marcela Noble can also be thought of as a displaced version of Batman and Robin's duo, the twinning of the hero and wretch who struggle to keep their genetic codes away from the vampire-like instincts of a nation that craves blood. Mocking any vestige of purity or pedigree, *Los topos* addresses the limits of the 'wounded family', and the impossibility of reaching its full ideals of purity. Joyfully, the very syntax of this lineage becomes frantic, corrupted and ultimately transvestite.

In those terms, I suggest that the successive forms of transitioning depicted by

Bruzzone offer a new response to the broken lineage enacted by the abducted-son. *Los topos* inflates and choreographs the traumatised lineage of the descendants through a series of intersections among gender transgressions and political conversions that have no end. During different and contested political periods, the figure of the son has become progressively damaged-broken-abducted-stolen-converted-vindicated in Argentina. Moreover, these mutations could be read alongside the central status acquired by the relatives during Fernández de Kirchner's administration. While suggesting a parallel between the descendants and a series of trans-superhero characters, Bruzzone's fiction liberates the descendants from their fatal destiny. It suggests that the figure of the son is not rigid and fixed forever but rather, opened to constant mutations and process of becoming. Thus, the descendants are no longer constrained by the duty of remembrance but free to reign under other guises. The inscription of the descendants' drama alongside feelings of kinship that go beyond the limits regulated by law could also be addressed as a process of 'queer peformancing', to use Blackman's expression. It ultimately stresses the production of alternative subjectivities in the wake of trauma.

The cyclic end

In the last scene of the book, the readers find *El Alemán* and the queer son transformed into a transsexual couple that shares a romantic venue near a gorgeous Patagonian lake. Despite the inviting landscape, the past seems to be just around the corner:

How beautiful you are, he says, I cannot ask for more. He rubs his hands together over the fire and we stare at each other for a long time. Later, he folds his arms. Whenever you are ready, we can go out to search for Maira, you just let me know and that's it.²⁶

In this muddled temporality not only perpetrators and descendants are murderously knotted, but so also are the past and the future. The search for Maira is then

²⁶ In the original: 'Qué linda sos, dice él, no puedo pedir más. Se frota las manos sobre el fuego y nos miramos fijo un buen rato. Después se cruza de brazos. Cuando vos quieras salimos a buscar a Maira, vos me decís y listo' (Bruzzone, *Los topos*, p. 189). (my translation).

inevitable. Somehow, the readers are back at the beginning, as if they were listening to the grandmother Lela's crazy shouting in front of ESMA. The last line of the story finds the protagonist captured by a new stillness: 'To be true, right now, with such a cold, there is not much more to do.'²⁷

Instead of considering this closing scene as tragedy, I would like to suggest that it captures a hidden form of the comical, one that according to Bergson follows the shape of a 'roulette'.²⁸ The narrator's quietness highlights how the work of mourning involves for the descendants dealing with entangled temporalities that often do not adjust. Indeed, for the offspring of Argentine trauma, past, present and future can appear to be intimately bound, as if the past were never completely buried, and the memories of the missing continue to make the case for occupying the forefront of the scene.

I would like to suggest that *Los topos*' cyclical ending embodies a new version of the queer temporality discussed in other chapters. To some extent, the closing image of the book works as a reminder of how certain experiences that I have gathered within this non-normative archive are embedded in multiple temporality. This also recalls Carolyn Dinshaw's work on sexualities and queer archival encounters, in which she is interested in those frantic moments in which 'the past touches the present'.²⁹ By exposing those contested affects and touches across times, *Los topos* stages the precise moment in which the work of mourning enters into a sort of limbo; the period in which the pendulum between opportunity and failure seems to point towards a mute zone for which there is no future. In fact, *Los topos*' last scene seems to reverse Bruzzone's spoken command of getting over melancholia. Drawing on this transitional time, his fiction provides powerful images to revisit the secrecy that haunts the attempts to simply 'getting over' the trauma. In its dark and bitter mood, it depicts how the circular rounds of the past keep returning, or maybe they are just parked at the next corner like old buses to a sinister depot. This stubborn pace of Argentina's mourning is perhaps also its secret power, one that also touches across

²⁷ In the original: 'La verdad que ahora, con este frío, no hay mucho más para hacer' (Bruzzone, *Los topos*, p. 189) (my translation).

²⁸ Henri Bergson *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Manor, 2008), p. 24.

²⁹ Carolyn Dinshaw, 'Temporalities', in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. by Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 112.

generations. For the *Madres*’ and the descendants the past is still there, as obscure, sticky, murky and resistant as a mole. Nevertheless, I wish to make the case that *Los topos*’ final scene stages this dark scenario in order to break the spell. In so doing, it manages to liberate a new space in the present.

Breaking the spell

In order to fully demonstrate this, I need to go back to the Patagonian landscape where the narrator-son and the German-father are having their romantic meal. There, we can listen to the protagonist’s rambling thoughts:

What Maira wanted, what Mum wanted, and also Dad in his way, was a new world, a world anew, a new man, blissful men because of the arrival and the promise of return, the white sisters, the purest daughters of the snow, of the most intense coldness that becomes a night of love.³⁰

This frantic, poetic and hallucinatory monologue seems to suggest, at least, one horrifying possibility: that the descendants may want exactly the same as their missing parents wanted. In this sense, the story of the offspring would involve, what Ahmed calls in a different context, a ‘reconciliation of want’, in which two generations are aligned under an exceptional reunited desire.³¹ By staging this extreme version, *Los topos* not only contests the obsession with the past that is at the core of Argentina’s drama, but also the ‘happy’ scenes of reconciliation championed by the associations of the relatives. In fact, the evocation of these ‘purest daughters of the snow’ seems to deploy the idea of *pedigree* and the privileges of blood that circulated through the seemingly ‘pure’ lineage of descendants. The last whispers of the queer son also seem to prelude the organic and furious response delivered by the relatives during the Schoklender’s scandal (pp. 123-126): undoubtedly, in the view of the selective relatives, a killer of his parents does not have either the ‘right blood’ or the ‘purity’ to wear the *Madres*’ white scarves.

³⁰ In the original: ‘Lo que Maria quería, lo que quería mama, y papá a su manera, mundo nuevo, nuevo mundo, hombre nuevo, hombres felices por la llegada, y la promesa de retorno, de la hermanas blancas, las más puras, las hijas de la nieve, del frío más intenso que se vuelve noche de amor’ (Bruzzone, *Los topos*, p. 185) (my translation).

³¹ Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 149.

It could be argued that *Los topos* does nothing but iterate the biological normativity of the 'wounded family'. Nevertheless, I suggest reading it exactly as the opposite. Moreover, the fantasy of reconciliation performed by Bruzzone's fiction enables me to sharpen my response to Diana Taylor's idea of 'DNA of performance' during her analysis of H.I.J.O.S.' activism (pp. 44-45). As already argued, in Taylor's perspective, Argentine post-dictatorship is embedded in a self-same repetitive paradigm of public presentation based on a bloodline connection of biological kinship.³² In my own analysis, *Los topos* queers this framework to offer a different answer. While Taylor conceives the idea of transmission as attached to sameness and repetition of biological kinship, Bruzzone's fiction enables the reader to rethink kinship as a form of transmission through difference. In so doing, *Los topos* also reveals alternative subjectivities that have emerged from the experience of grief. These forms of 'queer becoming', to borrow again Blackman's expression, do not correspond to the biological normativity prescribed by the official discourse, but suggest a novel combination of affects and desires, which have emerged in response to trauma.³³ In fact, the malicious portrait of the missing parents and their queer descendants gathered together as part of a desirable family disfigures the bloodline normativity. Within *Los topos*' twisted lineage, there is no origin to be recovered but endless distortions and displacements that have no secure law.

While reworking performativity as a form of citationality, Butler notes that to 'cite' the law is to produce it differently and finally to displace it.³⁴ In parallel terms, I suggest that *Los topos* 'cites' the biological normativity of the 'wounded family' to show how the possibility of forging a different future will always come from resources inevitably impure.³⁵ In so doing, it creates unforeseen images for non-biological encounters, which suggest twisted coalitions across time. Indeed, the final image of Dads, Mums and the 'pure' daughters of the snow stages a self-fashioned community of queer affections. Waiting for the arrival of the 'new world', this queer family mimes and displaces the performance of DNA, while transforming it into a last

³² Diana Taylor, *The Archive of the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 175.

³³ Blackman, 'Affect, Performance and Queer Subjectivities', p. 195.

³⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 15.

³⁵ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 241.

big joke.

It is my argument that *Los topos*' fatal ending exhibits the worst-case scenario in order to reverse the threat. It does what the human rights narratives and the discourses of the relatives cannot: it demonstrates how humour can queer traditional repertoires of memory that are still at stake in contemporary Argentina. Against Taylor's predictions, Bruzzone's fiction illustrates how new generations can always manage to find their spaces in the present. Via its dark laughter, *Los topos* shows how other forms of reparation are possible. It ultimately shows the extent to which the legitimacy of blood cannot be taken for granted. In those terms, the novella emerges as a startling response to a period of institutionalisation of grief. To some extent, *Los topos* enables the readers to taste the flavours of the non-normative. Thus, other forms of affective communities become palatable, and to some extent also enjoyable.

A new grief

Despite the fact that *Los topos* was published in 2008, I suggest that the book foresaw how disputes around varying versions of the past would propose dramatic intersections in subsequent years. During Fernández de Kirchner's first term of office, Argentine society experienced a split into seemingly irreconcilable factions that somehow continue until today. Although the process began in late-2008, mainly following the official decision to implement an export tax on agricultural goods, by late-2010 this eventually led to a major political conflict.³⁶ The dispute was articulated between two main belligerent poles: the Kirchnerist Government vs. '*El Campo*' (The Farm). If the tension was a classic, to some extent, it also came to be read in terms of the heritage of dictatorship. The feelings of vulnerability and hate that emerged during this outbreak of violence were foreshadowed by Bruzzone's novella.

In September 2010, I arrived in Buenos Aires to present at an international conference

³⁶ In fact, during the passing of the Law 125, the Vice-President of the country, Julio Cleto Cobos, voted against the official proposal, splitting the government into two irreconcilable sections. Nonetheless, as Brenda Werth argues, this economic conflict had its beginnings in the 18th century. See B. Werth, *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics in Argentina* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), p. 205.

on the Politics of Memory that was scheduled to take place at the former ESMA.³⁷ I was surprised by the strong sense of polarization that animated the public sphere. There seemed to be no space in-between, nor room for critique, or any other mediation within binaries that had become completely hegemonic. Even my most sceptical friends and colleagues felt compelled to take sides, as if the only possible position were to be for or against the current government. The political arena was conceived in terms of war.

By the end of October 2010 the spiral of violence had its final expression in a trade union clash where Mariano Ferreyra, a 23-year old student and member of the *Partido Obrero* (Workers' Party), was inexplicably murdered during a demonstration in support of rail employees made redundant.³⁸ His death was conceived as the first political bereavement of the Kirchnerist period. The resonances were vast. Still, just one week later, a new episode completely changed the political scenario; the former president Kirchner died of a heart attack. The shocking news worked as a test to calibrate the feelings of kinship that had emerged from loss. I would like to read the period in tune with the progressive chain of queer metamorphosis anticipated by *Los topos*.

'Orphans once again'

27 October 2010 was an unusual day. It was declared a bank holiday since the National Population Census was taking place, and people were obliged to stay at home. By 10 am the news of Kirchner's death was broadcast across the media. While detractors furtively celebrated indoors, by sunset thousands of supporters gathered at the Plaza de Mayo. They cried in the streets, brought flowers, and home-made souvenirs for his memorial. Thousands of youngsters with no previous political background occupied the front of scene to pay homage to the leader who had made them 'discover the pleasure of politics'— as they expressed it.³⁹

³⁷ The III Seminario Internacional Políticas de la Memoria 'Recordando a Walter Benjamin: Justicia, Historia y Verdad. Escrituras de la Memoria' was originally scheduled for 28-30 October 2010 at the cultural center 'Haroldo Conti'. It finally took place from 30 October to 1 November because of the official period of national mourning.

³⁸ Laura Vales, 'Morir por apoyar a trabajadores despedidos', *Página 12*, 21 October, 2010, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-155429-2010-10-21.html> [accessed 12 November 2011]

³⁹ Julieta Nassau and Luján Scarpinealli, 'Los jóvenes K conquistaron la plaza' *La Nación*, 21 October

For the memorial service, Fernández de Kirchner stood for hours next to her husband's coffin, which was set up in the *Casa Rosada*. The government building remained opened for the vigil, and a multitude queued the whole night to offer condolences to the President. 'Be strong, Cristina', was the insistent plea.⁴⁰ During the communal and highly theatrical procession, the widow received the support of hundreds of mourners who had become, somehow, an extended family in grief. The relatives' associations occupied the foreground of the demonstrations. Estela Carlotto, *Abuelas'* leader, and Hebe de Bonafini were the first to console the widow. The *Mothers* brought their scarves to cover the grave. 'He was also our son,' they said evoking Kirchner's inaugural speech in which he presented himself as the 'son' of the *Madres* and the *Abuelas* of Plaza de Mayo. Bonafini wept in front of the coffin. 'Don't cry Hebe, don't cry, we need to be strong', urged the President embracing the Mother. 'Orphans once again', bewailed H.I.J.O.S. 'He was our second father', they claimed.⁴¹ The media suspended all ordinary transmissions. Juan Cabandié, one of the abducted children and personal protégé of the deceased leader, cried on the radio, incapable of pronouncing a word.⁴² His weeping spoke of this helpless feeling of orphanage that circulated within broad sectors of Argentine society.

I would like to suggest that the events precipitated by the new grief showed the extent to which the notion of kinship in play in Argentina did not correspond any longer to a traditional family. The choreographed ceremony of mourning was empowered by a sense of affective support, which was not at all normative. It was not the idea of a terrorised Argentine family targeted by the military regime, nor a simple re-staging of the 'wounded family' championed by the relatives. Rather, it was a self-fashioned and

2011, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1319685-los-jovenes-k-conquistaron-la-plaza> [accessed 12 November 2011]

⁴⁰ In the original: '¡Fuerza Cristina!' (my translation). The slogan became the lei-motive of the funeral, as reported by the international media. See S. Gallego-Díaz and A. Rebossio, 'Argentina se funde en el abrazo a Kirchner', *El País*, 28 October 2010, http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Argentina/funde/abrazo/Kirchner/elpepuint/20101028elpepuint_6/Tes [accessed 12 November 2011]

⁴¹ In the original: 'El también era nuestro hijo', 'No llores, no llores, tenemos que ser fuertes', 'Nos quedamos huérfanos otra vez', 'El era nuestro segundo padre' (my translation). See *Tiempo Argentino*, 29 October 2010, <http://tiempo.infonews.com/notas/cristina-no-llores-hebe-no-llores-que-hay-que-ser-fuerte> [accessed 12 November 2011]

⁴² As commented in the Introduction Cabandié was one of the speakers at the recovery of ESMA on March 2004 (p. 23). He is also Vanina Falco's non-biological sibling, as addressed during the analysis of *Mi vida después* (pp. 140-150).

self-created and, to some extent, also joyful community in mourning, which made visible the unconventional affiliations built as a response to grief. The multitude that was at stake during those days could be perceived as an expanded family in loss, one that enacted a non-biological conception of kinship, which had broadly permeated, at least one important sector of the civil society. This alternative political lineage already circulated through the Argentine society through different unarticulated forms. Kirchner's death managed to make it visible. It confirmed a queer displacement between family, loss, and political heritage. This displacement of kinship was clandestinely announced by *Los topes* in 2008.

During those days of sorrow, Kirchner's famous statement during his inaugural speech resonated once and again: 'I am the son of the *Madres* and *Abuelas* of Plaza de Mayo.'⁴³ In the wake of death, that slogan acquired an expanded political significance. Indeed, the appropriation of the role of the injured son by the former leader displaced the uniqueness usually attached to the figure of the mother. Instead, the position of the son was opened to an expanded series of (queer) political and affective iterations; since, arguably, we can all be daughters and sons. I would like to suggest that this displacement of the route of the descendants was prefigured by Maira's character. Drawing on a twisted lineage of the descendants' drama, Bruzzone's book already invited its readers to imagine the non-conventional forms of attachment emerging out of a common loss. In its dark, extreme language, *Los topes* offered the opportunity to envision the reconfiguration of an affective community, which ultimately suggest an alternative conception of politics attached to non-biological modes of love, support, and care.

Black light theatre and the neo-disappeared

In this last section, I would like to explore a progression within the non-normative system of kinship that features in the post-Kirchner era. In this period, I argue, a new political alliance was constituted. As the local scholar León Rozitchner suggests, this lineage draws upon female figures such as of that the *Madres* and *Abuelas*, leaving

⁴³ Kirchner's inaugural speech was commented in the Introduction (p. 22).

vacant the position of the ‘Terrible Father’.⁴⁴ In fact, immediately after Kirchner’s death, speculations proliferated doubting whether his widow would be able to command a country gripped by internal tensions and recurrent griefs. The main doubts concerned whether the President could deal with the many contested factions inside the Peronist movement that she had inherited. Whilst fears abounded, her supporters played out the role of a new breed of orphans. A former H.I.J.O.S.’ activist posted on his website: ‘There is Cristina, the Mother who will continue, who will resist. First are the Mothers. Now that the father is dead, Cristina has to raise all her children alone, we love her so much.’⁴⁵ In this way, during those days of bereavement a process of transference took place. A non-normative political lineage nurtured the power of the Mother-Widow. I suggest that Fernández de Kirchner managed to rebuild her legitimacy, drawing from the figure of these other *Madres*, the women who did not want to relinquish their own losses and came to the governmental building to offer their scarves to the dead man and their support to the widow in power. In this displaced family in power, I will argue, the figure of the deceased leader was transformed into the ‘neo-disappeared’. Almost like Maira.

In fact, during the days that followed Kirchner’s death, Fernández de Kirchner did not hesitate in making visible her sorrow. One week after his death, she featured in a compelling 5-minute video for the nation. Dressed up with an elegant mourning outfit—which she still wears today—she looked empowered by pain. She discouraged political adversaries by insisting that missing her husband was not the most ‘difficult’ moment of her life, but the most ‘painful’.⁴⁶ The President went further: ‘This is the loss of a partner of 35 years, a life partner, a partner of struggle, of ideals. A part of myself vanished away with him’.⁴⁷ She finished the speech abruptly broken by tears. Although the discourse could have been recorded again, it was known that Fernández

⁴⁴ León Rozitchner, ‘Un nuevo modelo de pareja política’, *Página 12*, 10 November 2010, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/subnotas/156626-50240-2010-11-10.html> [accessed 25 November 2011]

⁴⁵ In the original: ‘Ahí está Cristina, la madre, para seguir, para resistir. Primero a las madres. Porque muerto el padre, ahora Cristina tiene que criar sola a todos sus H.I.J.O.S. que tanto la aman’ (my translation).

⁴⁶ Lantos, Nicolás, ‘No es el momento mas difícil es el momento más doloroso’, *Página 12*, 2 November 2010, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-156137-2010-11-02.html> [accessed 24 January 2011]

⁴⁷ In the original: ‘Es la pérdida de quien fue mi compañero durante 35 años, compañero de vida, de lucha, de ideales. Una parte mía se fue con él’ (my translation). *Página 12*, 2 November 2010, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-156137-2010-11-02.html> [accessed 24 January 2011]

de Kirchner preferred not to. In some unattended way, her bereavement emerged as a sign of authority. In this process, the President managed to transfer her loss to the audience, seeking a national operation of healing. Twenty days after the leader's death, the widow was back in public. This time, she referred to her husband as 'the strongest and the best among all of us'.⁴⁸ The narrative was remarkable: she used the same vocabulary that the relatives apply to pay tribute to the 'disappeared'. In fact, the slogan of the missing as the 'best ones' largely informs the national repertoire of loss. The same legitimising images were iterated as part of an expanded operation of transference. In her next intervention, the President dedicated her speech to the youngsters who took part in the memorial demonstrations:

Let me thank in a special way the tens of thousands of youngsters who sang and demonstrated with pain and joy, chanting for *him*, for their motherland [the day of Kirchner's death]. I want to tell all these young people that, on each of their faces. I saw his face as I had seen it for the first time. There it was exactly his face. And allow me to tell these youngsters that they are luckier than he was when he was young, because they live in a country a lot better, a country that did not abandon them, a country that did not condemn them, nor persecute them. On the contrary, a country that summoned them, a country that loves them, and needs them, a country that we will still build together.⁴⁹

The quality of the manoeuvre was exceptional. The elusive transpositions evoked by the presidential speech suggested a spectral contagion across generations. In the face of those youngsters who flooded the Plaza de Mayo the day of the leader's death, Fernández de Kirchner saw 'his face'. The image of the missing circulating back and forth contributed to narrow the distance between the deceased leader and the new

⁴⁸ In the original: 'El era el más fuerte y mejor que todos nosotros' (my translation), 17 November 2010 <http://www.cadena3.com/contenido/2010/11/16/65855.asp> [accessed 24 January 2011]

⁴⁹ In the original: 'Permítanme agradecerles en forma especial a las decenas de miles de jóvenes que cantaron y marcharon con dolor y con alegría, cantando por él, por la patria. Quiero decirles a todos esos jóvenes que en cada una de esas caras yo vi la cara de él cuando lo conocí. Ahí estaba el rostro de él, exacto. Y decirles a esos jóvenes que tienen mucha más suerte que cuando él era joven, porque están en un país mucho pero mucho mejor, en un país que no los abandonó, en un país que no los condenó ni los persiguió: al contrario, en un país que los convocó, en un país que los ama, que los necesita, en un país que vamos a seguir haciendo distintos entre todos' (my translation). The passage was quoted in an article written by Nicolás Llantos. See 'Los sub-35', *Página 12*, 9 January 2011, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-160147-2011-01-09.html> [accessed 23 December 2012]

generations of supporters. In fact, this entanglement of *faces*, evoked by the President, could be thought as the counter token of the *faceless* assemblage constituted between the disappeared and the unnoticed servants in Martel's film, as addressed in Chapter 2 (p. 101). To some extent they are both self-fashioned and ultimately queer communities constituted 'across times', to use Dinshaw's expression.⁵⁰ Somehow those thousand missing from the dictatorship also inhabited these other youngsters 'luckier than he was', who came to bid Kirchner's farewell. I would argue, therefore, that the liturgy of the 'wounded family' empowered the presidential figure with a renewed aura of authority. The transference was endorsed. A survey published a week after the former leader's death, revealed that Fernández de Kirchner's strongest support was among those under forty.⁵¹ Less than one year later, on 23 October 2011 she was re-elected as President by 54 percent of the votes.

I would like to take this argument a step further. In fact, this process of transmission managed to bring two experiences of mourning together: a collective loss attached to the military repression and the isolated and premature death of a political leader. Despite the obvious distance between both losses, the interventions of the Widow-President infused them with a similar affective atmosphere. It worked as if the new grief demanded the vigour of the previous one. Via its legitimising impulse, the President asked for redemption, not only of her loss but also of her government. In this process of transference, the death of the former leader endorsed a new heroic narrative. If in life Néstor Kirchner adopted the role of the 'son', after his death he became a 'neo-disappeared'. Almost deified, he is now recalled as '*EL*' ('HE').⁵² Estela Carlotto, leader of *Abuelas* best acknowledged this affective transmission: '*HE* is already with the 30,000 [disappeared]', she said.⁵³

In this expanded family of loss, Fernández de Kirchner adopted her public image of

⁵⁰ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post- modern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 142.

⁵¹ Ezequiel Spillman, 'Efecto Néstor: la mayoría de los jóvenes prefiere votar a Cristina', *Perfil*, 7 November 2010, <http://www.diarioperfil.com.ar/edimp/0521/articulo.php?art=25333&ed=0521> [accessed 22 December 2011]

⁵² This is also acknowledged by the local scholar Beatriz Sarlo. See B. Sarlo, 'Nombrar a Kirchner', *La Nación*, 7 October 2011, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1412508-nombrar-a-kirchner> [accessed 25 November 2011]

⁵³ In the original: '*EL* ya está con los 30,000 desaparecidos' (my translation). The capitals and emphasis are mine. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZudyAI3djU> [accessed 25 November 2011]

Mother-Widow. By the end of January 2011, this malleable series of mutations, ultimately sanctified by a maternal spirit, was made explicit. Facing the last months of her first term of office, the President claimed:

Like all mothers I will take care of the manifesto initiated in 2003 as if it were a baby [...]. It is a creature that will turn eight years old, who has lost her father but still has a mother who will fight tooth and nail to keep her safe.⁵⁴

In this way, the President infused the role of the Mother with new life. In fact, this displaced performance of kinship was already in play in Bruzzone's novella. *Los topos* offered a queer account of the drama of the descendant, a trans-parody where all familial positions were subverted. I would like to suggest that the expansion of kinship that came into light after Kirchner's death reminds us of how the past can become a 'vibrant source for community building' in the present, as the queer scholar Dinshaw well acknowledges.⁵⁵ The sense of belonging to this political community does not respond to biological inscriptions, but rather to the fantasies of a nation empowered by grief. Since Kirchner's death, loss emerged as the affective experience that illuminates non-biological forms of political tie that become transmitted throughout extended sectors of Argentine society. The image of an expanded family in loss contributed to cherish an expanded idea of 'we'. This lineage is the one that furtively governs the country. This series of non-aligned acts of mourning mimes and displaces the plethora of family arrangements established by the relatives. In so doing, it also queers conventional repertoires of memory.

Nowadays, Argentina's democracy has been infused with a renewed legion of 'sons' and 'daughters'. By the beginning of 2012 the President had to deal with a thyroid surgery, which had some risks of being cancer and fortunately was not.⁵⁶ By the day that the surgery was scheduled, on 4 January, a group of young activists promoted a

⁵⁴ In the original: 'Como todas las madres, cuidaré el modelo iniciado en 2003 como si fuera una criatura [...]. Es una criatura que cumplirá 8 años, a quien se le fue el padre pero quedó la madre para defenderlo con uñas y dientes'. See *Página 12*, 26 January 2011, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/ultimas/20-161192-2011-01-26.html> [accessed 30 January 2011]

⁵⁵ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post- modern*, p. 142.

⁵⁶ See 'El mejor final', *Página 12*, 8 January 2012, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/principal/index.html> [accessed 8 January 2012]

public campaign for blood donation. ‘Our blood for Cristina’, was the slogan.⁵⁷ The campaign, originally attributed to ‘La C mpora’, remained mostly isolated within a branch of young Peronist activists from the north of Buenos Aires. Nevertheless, the narrative was crucial. I suggest that the very initiative worked as a splendid image of the process of conversion that was already taking place, another form of secular Eucharistic; perhaps even more explicit than those celebrated during the cooking lessons at ESMA, as explored in Chapter 3. By offering blood to the Mother-President, the Argentines had the unique opportunity of joining the expanded political community in mourning. No ‘blue’ blood was required. In return, the ‘descendants’ -- regardless of age, class or pedigree--, become blessed and ultimately purified. The transference of blood consecrated the new orphans into the official lineage.

In this sense, I argue that the post-Kirchner era suggests a *re-domiciliation* of Argentina’s mourning. It illustrates the transference of a lineage. The univocal relation between victims and family roles has been displaced. By subverting the biological inscription of heritage, the ownership of the experience of loss has been detached from the hands of the relatives. This is precisely the process of conversion addressed by *Los topos*. In the current period, ‘the force of blood’, as claimed by the young activists, has become a key ingredient of politics.⁵⁸ The happy narrative of the ‘wounded family’ lays as if a corpse on stage. The performance of DNA has been joyfully infiltrated, transvestite, queered. To some extent, the Kirchnerist couple worked as progressive spies, infiltrators or ‘double agents’ within the narrative of the victims. In an unintended way, and as much as Bruzzone’s fiction, this expanded model of political family created an expanded room for non-conventional forms of ties. Listening carefully, it is possible to hear a laughter coming from the background. The *moles* are giggling again. Everyone is welcomed in this queer lineage of loss.

⁵⁷ See ‘La C mpora lanz  la consigna “La sangre por Cristina”’, *La Naci n*, 31 December 2011, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1437049-la-campora-lanzo-la-consigna-la-sangre-por-cristina> [accessed 1 January 2012]

⁵⁸ In the original: ‘La fuerza de la sangre’ (my translation).

Conclusion: The Recovery of the House

This project started with the story of a house. So does the ending. This story comes in different acts, which enfold one another.

Act 1: A house under arrest

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida, argues that the first figure of an archive is topologic. It is the violence of a power, a lineage, a place, a domicile: 'It is thus, in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that archives take place.'¹ I would like to suggest that in the aftermath of Argentina's dictatorship, the relatives of the victims have commanded the house of mourning. To some extent, they have kept this house under arrest. They have been the citizens who had the force to command the legitimacy of remembering. They have been the guardians of the processes of mourning. This right has been animated by the power of blood. This thesis has sought to show how the domiciliation of this archive has been displaced. In this sense, my project has encompassed a movement of transference of the experience of loss, one that goes from the relatives to the broader Argentine society. Non-biological feelings of kinship have reoccupied the house.

In order to illustrate this, my project has delineated a non-normative archive. It is an archive of unconventional acts of mourning. It does not rely on blood but on bonds that have been forged through acts of coming up against violence. The aim of my thesis has been to explore those forms of social belonging that have emerged from loss. They are plural ties that transpose conventional settings and propose a common condition of survival. My archive gathers different experiences together across different generations. The introduction uses the *Madres'* statement 'Our Children gave birth to us' as the departure for considering a non-biological lineage that reverses genealogical bonds. Chapter 1 explores how the black humour that informs H.I.J.O.S. works as a form of affective reparation in the face of loss. Chapter 2 proposes a dialogue between *Los Rubios* (Albertina Carri, 2003), *M* (Nicolas

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 2. Derrida's emphasis.

Prividera, 2007) and *La mujer sin cabeza* (Lucrecia Martel, 2008), showing how these disparate films displace the cult of the victim that defined the earlier ‘cinema of the disappeared’. Chapter 3 shows how the cooking sessions that take place at ESMA suggest a conversion of the site of death through food gatherings. Chapter 4 explores Lola Arias’ *Mi vida después* as an intergenerational artefact for the adoption of trauma on- and off-stage. Chapter 5 considers Félix Bruzzone’s novella *Los topos* (2008) as a prophetic exploration of the language of kinship, which governs the country since Kirchner’s death. The materials of this archive share a non-normative impulse. They shed light on a new sense of ‘being together’ that has emerged in the wake of violence. They also show how the aftermath of violence has not only produced pain but also new forms of pleasure. In this sense, this perspective illuminates how grief has offered space to a new community.

In the following pages, I would like to explore some of the encounters, dialogues and tensions that emerge among the subjects and materials involved in this unconventional archive of mourning. I will also examine a curious incident that took place when the law allowing same-sex marriage was about to be passed in Argentina. Then, I will draw on some strands of biographies marked by trauma to show how the concept of performance that informs this archive has enabled me to understand the relation between personal lives and social forms of becoming. I will conclude this thesis by offering a comment on *Monument of Escape* (2001, Dennis Oppenheim), an installation based at the Memory Park in Buenos Aires. I will show how this artwork contributes to make sense of the transformation operated in the realm of kinship in the aftermath of violence. Ultimately, I will make the case that Oppenheim’s piece helps to conceive how the house, which was placed ‘under arrest’ during the post-dictatorship period, has been expanded to host alternative forms of support and care.

Act 2: Queer dialogues, unexpected encounters

My project has proposed a novel approach for examining Argentina’s aftermath of violence. This framework has brought together the fields of kinship, queer theory and performance studies. To some extent, the rephrased conception of kinship I have proposed in my project draws from Judith Butler’s invitation. As she writes:

If we understand kinship as a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds, which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death, then kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death.²

In fact, the aftermath of Argentina's experience of violence witnessed the emergence of alternative forms of support, dependency and care for addressing the ubiquitous demands of loss in the restored democratic context. These modalities of social belonging have staged forms of ties that exceeded blood. In this sense, I contend that they can be thought of as 'queer bonds'. A recent discussion on this issue published in *GLQ*, enables me to frame further the intersection of fields that is at stake in my project. As already discussed in the Introduction, Joshua Weiner and Damon Young, address queer bonds as those forms of ties that appear under diverse conditions of negation and constraints, which query autonomous definitions of the subject.³ They also argue that queer bonds do not occur 'in spite of but *because* of some force of negation, in which it is precisely negativity that organizes scenes of togetherness.'⁴ Indeed, in this project, I have explored the new scene that emerged in Argentina as a response to the military violence and the forceful reworking on kinship imposed by its brutal intervention in the intimate-public sphere. While conceiving those attachments emerged from loss as 'queer bonds', I suggest an expansion of the field of kinship studies to address a constellation of new intimacies from a locally situated response to trauma. Moreover, my project studies these alternative attachments under the frame of performance studies to explore their potentiality for allowing new forms of social becoming and being together. Indeed, these modes of social bonding are not necessarily homosexual, but rather conceive queerness 'as a way of being-with and a mode of intimacy', as Weiner and Young also state.⁵

² Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 102-103.

³ Joshua Weiner and Damon Young, 'Queer Bonds', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17.2-3 (2011), 223-241 (p. 223).

⁴ Weiner and Young, 'Queer Bonds', p. 236.

⁵ Weiner and Young, 'Queer Bonds', p.237.

In this sense, by critically engaging with the works of Butler, David Eng, and Sara Ahmed, my project examines these forms of attachments that have existed around, outside of, or in the interstices of what I have referred to as the ‘wounded family’; that is the net of associations conformed by the relatives of those missing, which tended to appear as the only victims of violence. In this process, I have insisted on queerness as a form of critique against this bloodline normativity. Far from dismissing the pain of those directly affected by violence, I have been curious about exploring other modes of grief that touch on less obvious zones of injury. While looking for new spaces (and faces) around and beyond bloodline attachments, I have showed how seemingly less implicated witnesses can also adopt and partake in loss. In this respect, my approach has been concerned with reorienting the modes of critique towards a more inclusive politics of mourning, one in which a new ‘with-ness’ could be available to wider sectors of Argentine society.

In this respect, my project also shows how violence has allowed forms of cohabitation that otherwise might not have been possible. In this study, precariousness has been the condition of passionate encounters. Against conventional frameworks, my project focuses on pleasure. I have asked what attachments bind a society coming from loss and how these ties are constituted and transmitted across different generations. In so doing, I have both showed how the realms of the family and kinship are inescapably political and also the threshold space where unconventional pleasures could be inscribed.

The chapters of this thesis can be conceived as a series of queer family encounters. Drawing on Ahmed’s work on tables as main kinship objects, my project has attempted to queer the table of Argentine victims.⁶ In this sense, I have welcomed new guests to the table; even those who might look ‘oblique’, ‘strange’ or ‘out of place’ within the traditional net of victims.⁷ For instance, I have presented the cooking sessions taking place at ESMA as a recreation of family dinners around an unconventional table located at a former detention camp. I have also showed how Bruzzone’s fiction suggests an expansion of the table of the ‘wounded family’ to

⁶ Sara Ahmed, ‘Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12.4 (2006), 543-574 (p. 570).

⁷ Ahmed, ‘Orientations. Towards a Queer Phenomenology’, p. 570.

include nephews, cousins and mothers-in-law, and ultimately, all those who, like myself, may assume grief as a personal lived experience.

My framework has also proposed a critical examination of Marianne Hirsch's notion of 'post-memory' from the perspective of performance studies. This perspective has allowed me to examine processes of identification, imagination and projection in relation to traumatic pasts among less proximate witnesses.⁸ While accounts of the past have traditionally emerged from the side of the 'injured', my archive makes room for alternative voices. In this sense, the subjects that speak through these pages have different backgrounds and stories. For instance, I have considered how the production created by Lola Arias, who has no victims within her family, offers a playful stage for the adoption of trauma in the context of spectatorship. Even when considering narratives appearing from the side of the 'injured', I have focused on materials that shed light on unconventional acts of mourning. For instance, in the analysis of *Los topos*, I have showed how a son of the disappeared could become a 'double agent' to portray the series of mutation experienced by the descendants in the face of grief.

My project not only suggests a performative reworking of kinship beyond bloodline borders, it also relies on a broad conception of performance. In this sense, I have proposed an encounter with different actors, on and off the stage. Vulnerability is not a position inhabited by the victims; it is rather the very condition of spectatorship. On this basis, the possibility of sharing in grief has been expanded to 'foreign' witnesses who have an extra opportunity to adopt trauma within trials, theatre halls, cinematic experiences, cooking sessions, and other sites of public intimacy in which the traumatic past returns to be addressed collectively.

Overlooked by many studies on 'post-memory', humour has been of central importance here. My project has showed how younger generations explore legacies of trauma and grief not only without renouncing their own languages, but also building new ones. Drawing on the dark slang created by H.I.J.O.S., I have explored how different approaches and dimensions of the comical have expanded the vocabularies available for loss. In this sense, I have showed how humour has also contributed to

⁸ Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Post-memory', *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008), 103-128 (p. 113).

the building of a new sense of togetherness. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that my involvement with post-dictatorship Argentina does not mean to be exclusive. Rather, I suggest that the collection of experiences gathered in this archive may be productive to explore wider forms of transmission of trauma in other landscapes dealing with disparate traumatic pasts. After all, this archive has no masters. But it might have multiple gatekeepers.⁹

Act 3: Tensions, progressions, inversions

The materials included within this thesis not only suggest encounters, but also tensions, progressions and inversions. One of the main displacements identified within this project has been related to the enhanced performance of blood, witnessed during the current Kirchnerist era. In this sense, I have attempted to provide a response to Diana Taylor's idea of 'DNA of performance'. Although her concept has been particularly useful in exploring the many ways in which blood has remained at the heart of this period, I have also considered how and why it fails to account for the expansion of kinship occurring in Argentina post-2003. As largely explored in this project, the *Abuelas*' search for the abducted children has relied on DNA tests, which have been exceptionally helpful in reuniting families dismembered by violence. Nonetheless, far from a scientific genetic fingerprint encoding unique characteristics of individual subjects, I suggest, in contemporary Argentina blood has become a malleable political tie that has enabled different sorts of mutations and transitioning. This enhanced politicization of blood can be illustrated through a brief example. As with many other recovered grandchildren, Alejandro Sandoval, whose story was explored in the Introduction (pp. 31-33), has become a passionate supporter of the current government. His personal website bears a suggestive title: *ADN Nacional y Popular* ('National and Popular DNA').¹⁰ The slogan shows how the performance of blood has become divorced from a biological basis to emerge as a key political platform. In this respect, the case of the Nobles, also considered in the Introduction (pp. 30-31) has been paradigmatic. Although in July 2011 the results of the tests showed that the siblings were not likely to be descendants of the disappeared (at least,

⁹ I am grateful to my supervisor Catherine Silverstone for suggesting this progression.

¹⁰ Alejandro Sandoval, 'ADN Nacional y Popular', <http://adnnacionalypopular.blogspot.com/2011/10/batalla-cultural-peronistas-somos-todos.html?spref=tw> [accessed 12 October 2011]

their samples did not match the files gathered at the National Genetic Bank), the nuances of their blood have been part of a heated discussion, proliferating in broad sectors of Argentine society. Ironically, their DNA became ‘a popular and a national’ concern and the subject of a soap opera in many ways. In this sense, I suggest that Taylor’s performance of DNA has been *queered*.

Moreover, the cases studied here have demonstrated how the experience of mourning proposes the reassembling of new communities, which go far beyond bloodline ties. To some extent, each chapter stresses different aspects, folds and possibilities of this community building. The crew wearing the blonde wigs at the end of *Los Rubios* stands for an extended non-biological family in mourning. This sense of togetherness reappears in the expanded subjectivity built by Arias’ performance, in which the team of actors cross-dresses the parental figures to create new characters for the future. As a counter token, *Los topos* teases the fantasy of purity that remains at the core of the ‘wounded family’ through an organic assemblage of parents and perpetrators. As already observed, by staging the worst-case scenario, Bruzzone’s fiction also countersigns the performance of blood.

The feelings of kinship explored within this archive do not follow a linear temporality. Moreover, this project is also an invitation to move back and forth through the vibrating resonances left by the experience of grief. Many figures within this archive address this connection across time: time machines, cross-dressing, songs, pictures, films, testimonies; they are all forms of rehearsing trauma in the present. They also speak about the non-normative forms of pleasure that have emerged through experiences of loss. In so doing, they have infused the future with new hopes and desires. Within this expanded sense of time, a different affective horizon can be envisaged. My project has attempted to give an account of these potentialities.

Act 4: *Queremos mamá y papá* (‘We want Mum and Dad’)

On 15 July 2010, same-sex marriage became legal in Argentina: the National Parliament established equal rights to marry for all couples, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The new law also gave the same rights to adopt children. In so doing, Argentina became the first Latin American country to legislate

on this issue. In the days leading up to the passing of the law, different demonstrations took place in front of the Parliament. The first one reunited the detractors. The Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio described same-sex marriage as an initiative ‘inspired by the Devil’. Thereby, he called for a ‘war for God’ to safeguard against a ‘serious injury against the family’.¹¹ Following on from this, on 13 July, thousands of Catholic, evangelist and conservative groups dressed in orange lit candles and prayed against what they deemed an atrocity. The demonstrators defended their repudiation with one main argument: they contended that children ought to have both parental figures at home as the condition of a healthy environment. This claim eventually led to the adoption of a unified slogan, which was iterated through songs, flags, and postcards: *Queremos mamá y papá* (‘We want Mum and Dad’). The seemingly naïve tag-line not only introduced a perturbing regressive conception of the family into the public sphere, but also confirmed how conservative demands often tend to be enunciated in the name of the child. This is something that the queer scholar Lee Edelman addresses as part of his critique of what he calls a ‘futuristic reproductive politics’, one that aims at safeguarding the reproduction of heteronormative narratives.¹² Against the advocacy of the securing figure of the child, Edelman claims a ‘nonteleological negativity’, one that can break both normative times and politics, and may have no future.¹³

I suggest that a curious example of this negativity could be witnessed at Parliament Square exactly one day after the above demonstration. During a cold winter night, a new wave of demonstrators waited for the approval of the same-sex marriage law until the early hours of the following morning. As the chain of hurrahs, embraces and kisses spilled across the multitude, one image remained stuck in my mind. Among hundreds of demonstrators, I could spot H.I.J.O.S.’ activists. The organisation of the children of the disappeared came to support the equal marriage law and brought a peculiar flag: ‘We want Mum and Dad’, was written on it. The slogan was surprising. At some point, it sounded like a joke, a dark joke. By addressing their orphaned

¹¹ In the original the Archbishop Bergoglio referred to ‘a movida del demonio’ and claimed for ‘Guerra de Dios’. See Horacio Vertsky, ‘La Inquisición’, *Página 12*, 11 July 2010, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-149246-2010-07-11.html> [accessed 25 November 2011]

¹² Lee Edelman in Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, and Roderick Ferguson, ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13.2-3 (2007), 177-195 (p. 181).

¹³ Edelman, ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion’, p. 195.

condition through a humorous twist, H.I.J.O.S. showed how a seemingly naïve appellation of the ‘normal’ family also hid a dark and disfigured face. The flag echoed the conservative demand raised by the detractors but this time to subvert it. Violence had marked the entire society, even at its most unexpected borders.

I would like to suggest that H.I.J.O.S.’ flag performed a form of ‘nonteological negativity’, as advocated by Edelman. The playful and dark slogan uttered by the descendants effectively pointed towards a crucial displacement. It showed how the discussion of equal marriage took place in a society in which traditional kinship ties had been broken by violence. As much as the descendants could not recover their missing parents, ‘the Mum-and-Dad family’ demanded by the conservatives is no longer viable. At a deeper level, the flag also denounced how, under the Church’s eyes, only some families seemed to be worthy of life. Ultimately, their flag proposed a subtle process of transference. Since ‘the Mum-and-Dad Family’ is not longer the normative unit, to some extent, it can be argued that *we are all sons and daughters of the disappeared now*. Traditional life-narratives had been displaced. While calling for the impossible, H.I.J.O.S. showed how the scene of the ‘normal’ family did not fit the affective ties currently in play in Argentina. The heritages left by the dictatorship had re-entered the realm of the social while proposing an unconventional exchange between sexuality and politics. In this way, the flag demonstrated the extent to which questions around equal marriage could not be isolated to local, or even global, LGBT groups, but rather had to be discussed in the context of a country emerging from loss. In this way, the flag waved by H.I.J.O.S. also suggested an unforeseen encounter between public forms of intimacy and the heritage of violence.¹⁴

Still, H.I.J.O.S.’ surprising intervention in the field of sexual politics was enhanced by another fact. Once again, by stressing their orphaned condition, the descendants depicted themselves as the victims; they performed the role of the wretched. Through their dark statement, H.I.J.O.S.’ members made fun of themselves. In so doing, they confirmed how laughter worked as a form of political empowerment. Moreover, the ‘Mum-and-Dad’ flag also acknowledged and displaced the main tension that was

¹⁴ As Carrie Hamilton helped me notice, this queer cross fertilization of non-heteronormative and memory politics was also confirmed by the presence of transgender rights groups during the demonstration in the ‘National Day of Memory’ on 24 March 2011.

encrypted within the group since the mid 1990s. If by this time, dark humour worked as a main platform for survival, in an unattended manner, it also tended to confirm the 'privileging' of the victims. During those early times, the descendants were the only ones who could laugh about it. By contrast, their intervention at the same-sex marriage demonstration showed the extent to which something had changed. This time, the descendants were not the only ones authorised to laugh about their 'orphaned' condition. Rather, they transferred this power to all those in the streets, making laughter available to others. In this sense, their flag could be conceived of as a gift to the wider society. In this way, the 'Mum-and-Dad' flag also endorsed the process of transference at stake in contemporary Argentina.¹⁵

As I have explored in Chapter 5, *Los topos* also contributed to break this biological normativity. Bruzzone's novella brings new vocabularies to think of the queer engagements emerging from loss. In so doing, it proposes new attires and spaces for laughter. Moreover, the fiction created by an 'orphan' provides the audience with new figures of sexual citizenship that address more fluid arrangements between heritage and loss. If not all body transformation counts as a disruption of normativity, I suggest that the gender transitions experienced by the *Los topos*' characters can be read as an attempt to displace the power of blood. Moreover, the breast enhancements gained by the queer son metonymically contest the figure of the *Madres* as the exclusive female heroines of the aftermath of violence. In this way, Bruzzone brings to light new trans-heroes for the aftermath of violence.

There is a picture that is illustrative of this. It is almost an installation. Probably as part of a marketing strategy, a hard copy of Bruzzone's book was placed in front of ESMA, the former detention camp where the protagonist's sibling, a transvestite prostitute, might have been born. The book leans against the barriers of the former detention camp (see figure 5, p. 213). From the cover, the protagonist stares at his readers. He has a wicked figure and a stubborn gaze. It looks as if he were trying to seduce (and corrupt) both readers and the spectres that come from behind the barriers of the ex-detention camp. The queer son inhabits a strange temporality, one that seems to 'touch' across time. He has dressed up for the occasion: he wears an elegant

¹⁵ I am grateful to Carrie Hamilton for her invaluable contribution in developing this argument.

detective suit, which reminds me of the old coat that the filmmaker Prividera wore to search for the fate of his missing mother (p. 82). The protagonist seems to be inviting the readers to join in this trip. I suggest that *Los topos* invents a new sense of humour for post-dictatorship Argentina, one that displays sardonic teeth to spitefully mock narratives of victimization. This variant sense of the comical demonstrates how the experience of loss can be travestied by laughter. Similarly to H.I.J.O.S.' flag, *Los topos*' trans-heroes show how global debates concerning sexual politics adopt new (and queer) attires as soon as they intersect with the Argentine lineage of loss. The power of blood has also been queered. It shows the extent to which the aftermath of violence has opened space for new forms of belonging and becoming. This intersectional approach is also the one that I have tried to delineate in this project.

Act 5: A question of make-up

My project has also proposed an insertion of intimate stories within larger public histories. Following Lauren Berlant's argument that 'the autobiographical is not the personal', I have showed how the fragile material that informs private lives can also emerge as a performative zone of encounter for broader publics.¹⁶ In this sense, the cases that inform this archive demonstrate how reworking personal stories from a performance studies' perspective can shed light on a collective process of transmission. This collection encompasses the interviews conducted with H.I.J.O.S., the stories of injury that inform the documentaries explored in Chapter 2, the testimonies that were part of *Mi vida después*, and also the twisted autobiography proposed by *Los topos*. In all their disparate forms, these materials show how different forms of biography can also craft and make available non-normative acts of mourning.

My project has also called attention to the modes of affection that have emerged outside conventional forms of intimacy. Again, throughout the five chapters, various modes of these assemblages have been imagined. From the closed community enacted by H.I.J.O.S. in the 1990s, to the contested and ultimately futile couple formed by the Mother Hebe de Bonafini and her 'adopted son' Sergio Schoklender, this project

¹⁶ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. vii.

introduced, in disparate circumstances and for limited periods of time, different forms of queer bonds and, ultimately, also ‘families of choice’.

Building on this context, I would like now to focus on a particular story that has underlined this archive at different stages, mainly during the analysis of Lola Arias’ production *Mi vida después*. More than an individual story, it is the story of two siblings and their appropriator-father: Vanina Falco, daughter of the police officer Luis Falco, and her abducted non-biological brother, Juan Cabandié. I suggest that the bond constituted between these siblings not only exposes how much, in Butler’s terms, bodies are always given over to others, but also shows how loss and precariousness are always allocated differentially.¹⁷ For these siblings, Luis Falco played different but ultimately also overlapping roles; he has been an intimate repressor. Still, their strategies of dealing with this exposure to risk have been diverse. As I argued in Chapter 4 (pp. 134-135, 149-150), Vanina’s life experienced a dramatic turn when she discovered that her father was also the abductor of her supposed biological brother. ‘When I knew about Juan [Cabandié] my reaction was worst than when I had to confront my father about my sexual decision’, she stated in an interview.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the siblings’ bond was strengthened by these circumstances. To some extent, their attachment was constituted despite blood, or rather, coming up *against* blood. Both siblings experienced a transition in front of Falco’s figure: Cabandié had to rebuild his life as the abducted son and Vanina her life as the ‘deviant’ daughter.

I would like to focus now on the relationship between Vanina and her father. I believe that this singular modality of queer bond can contribute to tie further some of the questions that I have been interested in addressing during my project. In a documentary produced by the BBC, Vanina referred to her father:

If blood was a mandatory regime I would already have been condemned. I do not wonder if my father will die in jail, I don’t care, I don’t think about

¹⁷ Judith Butler, ‘Remarks on “Queer Bonds”’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17.2-3 (2011), 381-387 (p. 382).

¹⁸ In the original: ‘Cuando se desató lo de Juan tuve una reacción epidérmica peor que cuando tuve que enfrentar a mi padre por lo de mi decisión sexual’ (my translation). See Paula Giménez, ‘A la izquierda del Padre’, *Página 12*, 19 March 2010, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/soy/1-1283-2010-03-21.html> [accessed December 3 2011]

his death, for me this is a minor thing. It's bearing this link that I don't like. It is something that you cannot change. He is my father, and even though I have made a cut and I feel him as sort of stranger, it is still a great pain. At some point, it is like being an orphan. It is not something that makes me feel bad or lonely. I don't feel the lack of any fundamental bond. It is more like this scar, see? [she shows a wound on her arm]. When I was 8, I went through a window glass and saved my tendons by a miracle. Of course, it doesn't hurt any more, but [she hits the arm] it is a tremendous wound. Sometimes I have to put some make-up on it. With my father it is more or less the same. [...] I would love to have another father. However hard or wrong it may sound, it's true. To honour my father is just to be what I am [she laughs], and if Dad does not like it, it is Daddy's problem. I do not like my Dad either and I choose to be myself.¹⁹

Vanina's testimony draws on a major tension that also haunts the nuances of my project. If modes of interdependency are hardly chosen and never precisely easy, Vanina's circumstances stage a particular piercing example of this. At the time that she resists the idea of biology determining the only line of kinship, she also acknowledges that there is something irreducible about bloodline ties. Within Vanina's testimony, this conflict becomes mainly embodied by the physical presence of a scar, which reminds her of the pervasive figure of her father.

Sara Ahmed provides an interesting perspective for exploring the image of this wound. Drawing on Freud's assessment of melancholia as behaving like an open wound, she suggests that the figure of the melancholic 'provides "us" with a

¹⁹ In the original: 'Si la sangre fuera un mandato yo estaría condenada. No pienso si mi padre se va a morir en el cárcel, no me importa, no pienso en su muerte, para mí es algo menor. Es el cargar con ese vínculo que no se puede volver atras, y por más que yo haya generado un corte y lo sienta ajeno, todavía es un gran dolor. En algún punto es una orfandad de otra índole. No es una orfandad que me haga sentir mal o sola, porque me faltan esos vinculos fundantes, para nada. Es como esto, ves? [muestra una herida en el brazo] a los 8 años atravesé un vidrio y salve mis tendones de milagro. Por supuesto que ya no duele, pero está [golpea el brazo]. Es una tremenda herida. A veces tengo que maquillarmela. Bueno, con mi padre es más o menos lo mismo. [...] Me encantaría tener otro padre. Por más que suene duro y un poco incorrecto, es la verdad. Honrar a mi padres es justamente ser lo que soy [ríe]. Yo soy esto y si a papá no le gusta, problema de papá. Y a mi papá tampoco me gusta y yo elijo ser yo' (my translation). See BBC Mundo, 25 March 2010, http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/america_latina/2010/02/100126_mandamientos_honraras_padres_mz.sht ml [accessed 7 November 2010]

wound.’²⁰ I suggest that Vanina’s case is quite different. Her wound is clearly visible and ‘tremendous’, as she says, but it does not bleed any more. Moreover, she has learned to apply make-up to it. In her case, this operation not only involves concealing a wound but also a repudiated father. I would like to suggest that this gesture of ‘making-up’ the scar sheds light on a strategy that goes beyond cosmetics, one that speaks about the possibilities of working through the experience of trauma via performance. By this, I do not mean that Vanina’s condition of being an actor makes her more prepared for this task, although it may. Indeed, *Mi vida después* presents actors in the double sense of the word, both as performers and actors of their own circumstances. Vanina’s case is an enhanced example of this. Still, performance does not necessarily refer here to any form of insincerity, but rather to the expanded possibility of offering an account of oneself through the rehearsal of trauma. In fact, I suggest that through Arias’ production, Vanina’s experience of injury is also offered to the audience. To some extent, that wound becomes the path that constitutes a new ‘us’ in the context of spectatorship. This ‘us’ ultimately refers to all those second hand witnesses who can share and be transformed by the experience of trauma as the affective emergence constituted in the space of performance. More broadly, my project foregrounds affective communication and identification as being of central importance in processes of community building.

Nevertheless, Vanina’s case introduces a tension that cannot be easily avoided. It refers to the uncertain feeling of being injured and put at risk by violence. Vanina not only knows how to cover up her wound but also she has made a ‘cut’ with her father. Although affective, this cut is no less physical. The break with her father also defines the constitution of her body as much as the scar. In this context, the gesture of ‘making-up’ the scar can be conceived as an act of freedom, critique and responsibility. As it is clear from her testimony, Vanina defines herself in tension with this primary-repudiated figure. While exploring how bodies come into being, Butler contends that ‘this obtrusive alterity against which the body finds itself is surely linked to that primary dependency which is before and against our will’.²¹ It is precisely against the conspicuous figure of her father that Vanina constitutes herself in the present. ‘To honour my father is just to be what I am, and if Dad does not like it, it

²⁰ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 141.

²¹ Butler, ‘Remarks on “Queer Bonds”’, p. 384.

is Daddy's problem. I do not like my Dad either and I choose to be myself", she says. Against this bond, Vanina comes into being. The tension is alive. Her case provides a rich example of how, in Butler's terms, the possibility of 'giving an account of one self' is always a form of putting oneself in risk in order to confront power.²² To some extent, this form of critique also informs my project. It endorses the risk of coming up against the power of a lineage, which has been *the* key figure of the human rights' movement: the 'wounded family'.

I would like to suggest that Vanina's case also undermines the DNA of performance as introduced by Diana Taylor. Here again, the performance of blood is not attached to sameness or repetition. In Vanina's case, blood does not bring certainty but alterity. Biological kinship appears as something that she cannot get rid of and which, to some extent, becomes insupportable. Blood leaves her helpless and exposed to violence. Against the relatives of the missing who have made biological kinship the source of their authority, blood is Vanina's unchosen world. Paradoxically, biological kinship appears to her as a queer bond that she cannot master. Still, the repudiated relationship with her father also animates a sense of duty before which she chooses not to be. In those terms, Vanina's response to her father shapes her conditions of survival. As Butler writes, 'If survival depends not so much on the policing of a boundary but on recognizing how we are bound up with others, then this means we have to conceptualize the body in the field of politics'.²³ In the context of the bloodline normativity that has marked Argentina's aftermath of violence, Vanina's strategies to 'make-up' her scar can be conceived as a non-normative act of grief. It witnesses her transformation before loss. In a parallel way, my project has also attempted to shed light on those queer bonds that condition new forms of sociality and survival.

Act 6: Unconventional forms of happiness

I suggest that the case of these non-biological siblings establishes an important distinction that helps me to frame further my approach to the 'happy narratives' staged by the 'wounded family'. In her critique of normative forms of happiness, Ahmed notices that these modes of gratification seem to involve 'a narrative of

²² Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 23.

²³ Butler, 'Remarks on "Queer Bonds"', p. 385.

assimilation in the specific sense of becoming like'.²⁴ In a similar way, I argue that the biological narratives supported by the relatives of the missing have also relied on a form of assimilation. In fact, for the relatives, contentment is attached to blood. For instance, for the *Abuelas*, the idea of happiness follows the promised future in which the missing grandchildren will be recovered. By contrast, I would like to suggest that Vanina and her non-biological brother's possibilities of joy do not follow a straight but a queer line. Their scripts have been twisted. Their experience of injury provided them with an alternative script, different from the 'wounded family'. This narrative emerges not as condemnation, but rather as an affective life-world beyond the dictates of blood.

Moreover, the case of these non-biological siblings troubles the discourse of 'being like' in a different way. When they were children Vanina Falco and Juan Cabandié used to have very similar features: 'the same eyes', 'the same smile'; they were 'alike', as Vanina describes in Arias' production.²⁵ Afterwards, the reasons for this resemblance turned out to be more terrifying. When Cabandié's mother was held in captivity at ESMA, she was seventeen and already pregnant. As it was finally determined, there were strong resemblances between Cabandié's and Vanina's mothers. They were both blonde, with delicate complexions and blue eyes. This was the reason why Luis Falco finally decided to steal the baby and bring him home, as an improbable gift to his wife who could not have more children, as Vanina told me during our interview. Her father probably thought that this peculiar similarity could protect the secret, deflecting unwanted suspicion.

In all these overlapping ways, the case of these siblings suggests a model of happiness, which does not follow a straight line, but rather an oblique or twisted form of wilfulness. It proposes a self-created foundling narrative that illuminates unconventional forms of love and hope. Recently, both queer and kinship studies have been interested in identifying alternative kinship narratives, which 'are not organized by the desire for reproduction, or the desire to be like other families', as Ahmed frames it.²⁶ I argue that my project also contributes in that direction. Precisely, most

²⁴ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 112.

²⁵ Lola Arias, *My Life After* (2009), trans. Daniel Tunnard (unpublished), n.p.

²⁶ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 114.

of the cases gathered within my archive suggest a reworking of kinship that follows a different path from 'being like'. Indeed, they are stories constituted before or against blood, which suggest new attachments built from disorientation and loss. From their unexpected circumstances, they point towards non-biological communities that can help to stage a new sense of being together.

Moreover, the stories included in this archive embody a disobedient energy that also pursues unconventional forms of gratification and pleasure. They speak about 'queer forms of relationality' that rethink kinship as a form of friendship, as Lisa Blackman suggests in her important research on affects and performance.²⁷ As she also argues, these different forms of non-normative relationality are 'central to a politics of re-invention'.²⁸ In a similar way, my project also attempts to re-invent a politics of mourning for Argentine society. For that reason, I have been interested in forms of dealing with trauma that do not set behind the past, but rather they allow 'queer forms of becoming' in the face of grief, to borrow again from Blackman's expression.²⁹ In this sense, the form of 'queerness' that animates my project has been a critical methodology for exploring the creative process of 'working through' the scars left by trauma; one, which can also shed light on alternative futures.

Act 7: The blue jumper

I would like to explore here another story of non-normative happiness. As considered during the analysis of Lola Arias' production, *Mi vida después*, clothes can be productive surfaces for the circulation of affects. They are ubiquitous objects, emotionally charged, inhabited by contested emotions. Clothes travel through time. They can become mediums with which to touch the past and glimpse the future. As Aoife Monks argues, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between costume and the actors' bodies in the audience's experience of a performance; or indeed between real life and the stage.³⁰ Considering these comments, I would like to go back to the first scene of Arias's production, which shows one of the actors picking up a

²⁷ Lisa Blackman, 'Affect, Performance and Queer Subjectivities', *Cultural Studies*, 25.2 (2011), 183-199 (p. 183).

²⁸ Blackman, 'Affect, Performance and Queer Subjectivities', p.188.

²⁹ Blackman, 'Affect, Performance and Queer Subjectivities', p.193.

³⁰ Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 3.

pair of jeans that belonged to her mother and walking towards the past. There, I would like to pick a blue jumper instead.

After 35 years of searching, the journalist Marta Dillon recovered the body of her disappeared mother, Marta Taboada. She was a teacher and lawyer, and activist at the Revolutionary Party of Argentine Workers. In August 2011, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team found her remains in a mass grave, alongside other activists who were assassinated on a street corner in the Ciudadela district of Buenos Aires during the dictatorship. When Dillon recovered her mother, she was also given a bag with a pile of clothes that used to cover the bodies of these activists. She was told that some of these clothes might belong to her mother. In an article published in *Página 12*, where Dillon works as the editor of the feminist and LGBT sections, she wrote that when imagining what clothes her mother might be wearing the night of the kidnapping, she always thought of a striped jacket. She also mentioned that she liked to wear that jacket when she was a girl, even though it was too big for her.³¹ Although Dillon could not find the jacket among the pile of clothes, something called her attention to a blue jumper.³² It was while visiting 'Brigada Guemes', where her mother was held captive during the late 1970s, that she discovered why. While touring the former detention centre with Cristina Comandé, one of her mother's fellow captives, the woman suddenly stopped. Pointing towards an empty space, she commented that she used to sit with Taboada on a bench, which was no longer there. She even recalled Dillon's mother pulling up the sleeves of a jumper when the heat intensified. 'Do you remember what colour the jumper was?', asked Marta. 'Of course', said the woman, 'it was blue'. 'I found it!', yelled Dillon.³³

When I first read the article, I thought about how it resonated with Arias' piece. The episode of the blue jumper sounded to me like an intriguing scene, which could have been part of *Mi vida después*. The more I thought about these echoes, the more

³¹ See Marta Dillon, 'La polera azul' in *Página 12*, 13 January 2011.

<http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/las12/13-6228-2011-01-13.html> [accessed 20 October 2011]

³² In the original: 'Algo latía, en cambio, frente a la polera azul' (my translation). Dillon, 'La polera azul', <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/las12/13-6228-2011-01-07.html> [accessed 29 October 2011]

³³ Dillon, 'La polera azul', <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/las12/13-6228-2011-01-07.html> [accessed 29 October 2011]

extraordinary they appeared to me. I came to believe that it might not be just a coincidence. Probably, Marta had attended the show and the piece inspired her to forge her own story. I could have emailed to check (we used to work at the same newspaper until a few years ago), but in the end I did not. To some extent, the very possibility of such connection made me part of the story. Maybe Dillon effectively attended Arias' piece and it touched her to the point at which it contributed to her discovery. Or maybe it was just me, moved by her story and the unexpected resonances that it had in relation to my project. The episode arrived as the perfect excuse to examine my own investment in the materials and costumes that are part of this archive, which are also driven by unpredictable touches across lives and time.

The queer encounters did not stop there. They never do. Dillon is married to the filmmaker Albertina Carri, whose film, *Los Rubios*, was explored in Chapter 2 (pp. 73-8 and 98-99). I came to know that Dillon and Carri stood together in front of the Parliament that night in which the same-sex marriage law was about to be passed. They may have spotted H.I.J.O.S.' flag: 'We want Mum and Dad'. I wonder if they laughed about it. In some ironic way, the flag seemed to be dedicated to them. This is not only because in both their cases their parents have been 'disappeared', but also because they have a child together, Furio, who, thankfully, has two mothers. In fact, once same-sex marriage was legal, Dillon and Carri could finally celebrate their wedding. The party took place a couple of months after Dillon found her mother's remains. By that time, Dillon published another article in the same newspaper. In one of the passages, she wrote:

I have just got married for the first time, and I am in love. I have an impossible but well constituted family: my beloved Albertina, my two children with a 21-year age difference between them; a granddaughter; three dogs; two cats; and a number of friends on whom I know I can collapse and stand up again with my eyes closed. Nobody cares about these details except for me because they are the proof that I survived. It was by living all these years looking for you [her mother] that my family was crafted. Looking for justice for you, looking for a language through

which I could name you.³⁴

Dillon's words are particularly rich in the context of my project. Her testimony is embedded in a disjointed temporality that stages a non-normative way of perceiving the attachments to the past. She explicitly refers to her mother as the 'engine' that helped her to re-invent the bonds that saved her present. 'It was by living all these years looking for you that my family was crafted', she writes. In fact, it was the same experience of loss which framed her conditions of survival. Now, her 'well-constituted family' includes three different generations of relatives, plus friends and animals. As with many of the cases explored in my archive, Dillon's family has emerged from loss. Her feeling of being 'given over to others', to frame it in Butler's words, was enhanced by her mother's re-burial, almost a second death.³⁵ Even so, by this time, her queer family had already made room for an expanded sense of hope. In a parallel way, throughout this project, I have looked for alternative forms of sociality that may exist outside, around and beyond the engagements proposed by the 'wounded family'. In this process, I have relied on the force of queerness, both as method and non-normative form of attachment. Maybe like *Los topos* at a fictional level, Dillon's case brings both paths together. In so doing, it contributes to tie the materials that inform my archive. These lives that come to be bound to each other under enforced conditions may also bring a sense of reparation in the face of the insupportable.

Moreover, Dillon's testimony shows how the past is not rigid, but malleable and textured, written from the affective investments of the present; almost like clothes. She writes that during the past years she was looking for a language to 'name' her mother. In fact, in the article she literally speaks to her. The article is a delicate, intimate letter, which was made public. I would like to suggest that this public-letter

³⁴ In the original: 'Ahora acabo de casarme, por primera vez, enamorada y con una familia imposible pero bien constituida: mi amor, Albertina, mis dos hijos con veintiún años de distancia entre ellos, una nieta, tres perros, dos gatas, una cantidad de amigos y amigas sobre los que sé que puedo derrumbarme y levantarme con los ojos cerrados. A nadie le importan estos detalles, salvo a mí porque son la prueba de que he sobrevivido. Más que eso, he vivido todos estos años y buscándote es como fraguó mi familia. O buscando justicia para vos. O buscando un lenguaje en el que poder nombrarte' (my translation). See Marta Dillon, 'Los últimos ritos', *Página 12*, 24 November 2010, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/contratapa/13-157409-2010-11-24.html> [accessed 26 November 2011]

³⁵ Butler, 'Remarks on "Queer Bonds"', p. 382.

stands as the proof that Dillon actually found this language to name her mother. It is indeed a language dressed by loss. It names the insupportable but also the expanded ties to deal with it. It ultimately exposes how much bodies depend on others as the condition for their own survival. I suggest that this new language of loss has been put in circulation, and now is also available to share. In fact, my archive witnesses a similar attempt. It aims at providing an alternative language for loss, one that could frame the conditions of an expanded social survival, even among less implicated beholders.

There is an extra fold that I would like to uncover in relation to Dillon's story; one that helps to grasp the extent to which the dependency on others also relies on affective connections constituted across time. A year after her wedding, Dillon writes:

Many times we wonder [she and her partner Carri] what our disappeared mothers would say about our family and our love. They, who were so strict in their revolutionary morals -- and he, I have to add my father-in-law, would they have come home to cuddle our little boy with ease and detachment? 'Yes', is our answer. And it is not just a response forged by illusion. It is the realization of their voices in the voices of their surviving comrades that fill us daily with love from a distance.³⁶

This time, Dillon draws upon the complicity she found in her partner to re-examine the differential values attributed to activism by different generations. She subtly teases the political commitment of their mothers and also their 'revolutionary morals'. These dialogues and encounters with the past, which go back and forth unfolding through Dillon's words, also mobilise the materials that are involved in my project. I would like to suggest that these 'touches across time', to use Carolyn Dinshaw's expression,

³⁶ In the original: 'Muchas veces nos preguntamos qué dirían nuestras madres desaparecidas de nuestra familia y de nuestro amor. Ellas --y él, tengo que sumar a mi suegro--, que eran tan estrictas en su moral revolucionaria, ¿hubieran venido a casa a acunar a nuestro pequeño con la soltura y el desprendimiento necesarios? "Sí", nos contestamos. Y no es una respuesta ilusionada. Es la constatación de sus voces en las voces de sus compañeros y compañeras sobrevivientes que nos llenan de amor a diario desde la distancia que sea' (my translation). See Marta Dillon, 'Lo imposible, eso que sucede', *Página 12*, 15 July 2010, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-149585> [accessed 31 October 2011]

also propose a form of forgiveness in the face of the impossible.³⁷ As if moved by the time machine that operated in *Mi vida después*, Carri and Dillon's mothers also travel through time. They use the bodies of their comrades as surface and medium. These mothers come from the past to take care of their little grandson. They have friends who are also willing to help.

My project has also explored many cases in which the past touches the present. Moreover, I suggest that this pervasive presence of the past also helps to expand traditional understandings of kinship. These anachronistic coalitions of relatives and friends, which do not follow straight narratives, contribute to make clear in which ways we can affect and be affected by the past in the present. In so doing, they draw different forms of intimacy, which help to envision how the bloodline circle of the 'wounded family' may be expanded. More than a restrictive community of relatives, the reworking of kinship that I have proposed within this project takes the form of an impossible community. This community follows a queer historical impulse; it gathers past and present; loss and pleasure. This assemblage of flesh, costumes and time not only acts as Dillon's condition of survival but also of all those who might feel touched by the uneasy winds of the past and allow them to mobilise unexpected encounters.

Act 8: A true match

In Argentina the struggles of memory and heritage have risked being 'purified' in terms of blood. My project has essayed to contest this narrative through a queer approach. In so doing, I have proposed a de-territorialization of the traces of trauma from the realms of the biological family. In fact, the cases included in my archive constitute an attempt to demonstrate the emergence of new conditions of belonging. They show how the responsibility of remembering has moved to the 'open society'. Still, this rephrased *domiciliation* of grief also risks being misunderstood. Affective reparation does not occur on an individual level, but as a collective impulse that seeks the adoption of trauma in the present. While exploring the recent power of a 'queer liberalism' in the US, David Eng argues: 'unlike political theories of reparation, which seek to write history into a definitive past, psychic reparation does not delineate

³⁷ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 3.

such a finite process, but rather a process of *working through*.³⁸ In the context of my project, ‘affective reparation’ accounts for the opportunities of ‘working through’ the local process of grief as an expanded form of kinship. In this sense, the cases included in my archive show the various ways in which different modes of affective reparation are already taking place. In fact, this process of ‘working through’ the heritages left by the last dictatorship has staged a rephrased form of sociality, which also rethinks melancholia.

I am particularly interested in Eng’s idea of reparation since it delineates the grounds of ethics as not relying on individual subjects but on a new collective. This has also been at stake in my project. Indeed, the materials included in my archive show how individual stories coming back from loss are always connected and dependent on others. In this sense, I would like to recall the experience of the survivor of a detention camp who found himself already affected in front of Arias’ performance. Moreover, his laughter demonstrates how being exposed to others can bring surprising encounters. While it may be impossible to know in advance how bodies can be affected by pain or injury, the cases presented in my project have showed how the fact of being twisted and turned by violence might also bring hope for the future and suggest unforeseen responses to histories that are nevertheless unfinished. In fact, these cases also show that it is possible to move away from pure states of injury. Vanina’s wound will remain, even as a drained scar. Some make-up might still be needed. Moreover, I suggest that this ‘make-up’ can be conceived as a new texture, a sort of new outfit, another layer in the costumes of grief. In this sense, making-up the wound is also a way of ‘working through’ the effects of trauma, one that shows that affective reparation is possible. This ‘true match’ between mourning and the unconventional pleasures emerged from loss has also been at the foreground of my project.

Act 9: Epilogue.

In Buenos Aires, next to the river De La Plata, the Memory Park commemorates the victims of the dictatorship. There is a monument carrying the names of the missing,

³⁸ David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 196. Eng’s emphasis.

and also a park of sculptures. They have been selected in an open international competition, which included 665 artistic projects coming from 44 different countries. Although the project to build the park was approved in 1998, it was only inaugurated in 2007. Similarly to ESMA's case, the park faced years of resistances, delays and struggles among authorities of the city, the nation, and the internal splits among human rights and relatives petitions.³⁹

While the official purpose of the park is to keep memory alive for future generations, Vikki Bell and Mario Di Paolantonio suggest that the park sustains an experience of the 'impossible'. They argue that whereas the massive monument with the names of the missing stands as an 'open wound', by contrast, the sculptures 'refute the logics of equivalence and reconciliation, evoking instead the unsettled questions that still linger in the present'.⁴⁰ Drawing on this, I suggest that these installations embody an affective appellation for the audience. Rather than simply representing loss, perilously located in front of a river-tomb, they offer an opportunity for the adoption of trauma in the present. In so doing, they show how the work of mourning is always negotiated in the encounter with their beholders.

Among the dozen sculptures that have been finally placed in the *Parque de la Memoria*, the final act of my project emerges in the encounter with Dennis Oppenheim's *Monumento al escape* (2001), one of the first installations to be located at the park. I will argue that this artwork could be conceived as the story of my archive. It is also the story of a house that has been put 'under arrest'. Oppenheim's piece stages three huge boxes of steel that have been one on top of the other. It composes a home-space built of cellblocks, lights and large openings.⁴¹ A strange radiance illuminates the blocks of concrete when the light passes through the roofs built of red acrylic. The effect is uncanny. It looks as if the split house were trying to

³⁹ These disputes mainly concerned whether the riverbanks could be the 'right' site of commemoration for the disappeared and the fact that the names included in the monument are far less than 30,000, the iconic number that the relatives have flagged since the 1980s. In addition, one sector of the *Madres* rejected the monument by arguing that it may appear as an unwanted cemetery for unburied bodies. For further details on this see Vikki Bell and Mario Di Paolantonio, 'The Haunted *Nomos*: Activist-Artists and the (Im)possible Politics of Memory in Transitional Argentina', *Cultural Politics*, 5.2 (2009), 149-179.

⁴⁰ Bell and Di Paolantonio, 'The Haunted *Nomos*: Activist-Artists and the (Im)possible Politics of Memory in Transitional Argentina', p. 62.

⁴¹ See <http://parquedelamemoria.org.ar/parque-ing/nominados/dennisoppen.htm> [accessed 2 December 2010]

find a new balance on those unstable grounds (see figure 6, p. 213).

While exploring Oppenheim's piece, Bell and Di Paolantonio suggest that the ambiguity of shape and colour, and the oscillation between comfort and confining are also addressed by the title: *A Monument to Escape*. 'A monument to escape *of whom?*, one might ask, since so many did not escape; but perhaps this is the monument one has to escape, the prisons of the past from which the society must escape.'⁴² I would like to propose another a story for Oppenheim's piece, one different from escape. I suggest that this house addresses the forceful changes that the dictatorship operated in the realm of kinship. By turning the home space upside down, *Monumento al escape* manages to expose how family ties have been vividly transfigured during the post-dictatorship period. The building that stands in the park does not adjust. It looks strange, not entirely safe. This house has been disoriented, and yet it has not collapsed. Another balance has been reinvented.

More than offering space to something that is already there, *Monumento al escape* creates an uneasy, edgy demand in front of my presence. Its awkward shape appears before me bearing a sort of magical power. Standing in front of these overlapped boxes, touching its rough concrete, I would like to suggest that Oppenheim's piece works as an 'affective architecture', the material enactment of those alternative ties emerging from grief. The twisted installation offers asylum, a transitional home for those non-normative feelings of kinship that emerged in the face of violence, which have not yet been fully articulated. The house has been opened. It embraces expanded possibilities. It holds new forms of intimacy.

Moreover, these non-biological engagements unseat the figure of the 'relatives' as the only victim of the dictatorship. In dialogue with Derrida's *Archive Fever*, I suggest that *Monumento al escape* shows how a new '*domiciliation*' of the archive of mourning was possible. The building hosts another lineage, one that is not commanded by blood. While bearing witness to a new form of togetherness, this home-space transposes the law of the archive. It suggests the recovery of a house, which used to be 'under arrest'.

⁴² Bell and Di Paolantonio, 'The Haunted *Nomos*: Activist-Artists and the (Im)possible Politics of Memory in Transitional Argentina', p. 62.

The river works as the stage. It announces other coasts. Located in that public space, the house has been recovered for more residents. The house is inhabited by spectres; they are *faceless* both coming from the past and the future. They do not propose reconciliation. They do not adjust to the duty of memory. They speak about loss, grief and love. They claim an ‘impossible’ politics of mourning, one that can offer hospitality to different communities across time. The house is both a shelter and an orphanage. It bears witness to those non-directly affected by violence. I propose that Oppenheim’s piece shows how the house of mourning has been occupied by an expanded sense of care. This awkward, uncomfortable house also hosts my project. It gives shelter to the materials that inform my archive. They are stories built through the rehearsal of trauma, both in theatre and in life. A new story can always emerge at the juncture of grief. It is also my house now.

I step inside. There are no guardians at the entrance. There are no doors to lock. There is a vacant space. I can hear a mourning dog barking. There are clothes everywhere. They are mostly old but there are also new outfits. There are blonde wigs on top of a pile of fabric, ready to be picked out. The table is served. There is some extra crockery waiting for unexpected guests. New generations of orphans can come inside... and maybe laugh.



Figure 1: A Toast across Times: *Arqueología de la Ausencia* (1998-2000), Lucila Quieto's photographic essay. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2: Becoming Blondes: Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios* (2003) final scene. A new community in mourning. Photograph courtesy of the director.



Figure 3: Change of Outfits: Hebe de Bonafini Cooking at ESMA. It is time to feed new guests. Photograph courtesy of Vivi Tellas.



Figure 4: A Time Machine of Clothes: *Mi vida después* (Lola Arias, 2009). Cross-dressing the parental figures. Photograph courtesy of Lorena Fernández.



Figure 5: *Los topes* (Félix Bruzzone, 2008) portrayed at the front of ESMA. A new sense of humour in the aftermath of violence. Photograph courtesy of Patricio Zunini.



Figure 6: *Monument to Escape* (Dennis Oppenheim, 2001), *Parque de la Memoria*, Buenos Aires. Photograph courtesy of the *Parque de la Memoria*.

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